

WALTER ALLEN
THE ENGLISH NOVEL
A SHORT CRITICAL HISTORY



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TO L. P. HARTLEY
in friendship and admiration

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John Draper looked over his typewriter to the other side of the office, where Doreen was combing her hair. He found the performance distracting. Doreen wore a sleeveless blouse whose armholes yawned like intimate tunnels. Thin silk straps shone like minnows in the gloom. The edge of a brassière heaved into sight and then disappeared. To look was humiliating. Not to look was impossible. He tried to concentrate on his letter. 'Dear Mother and Father' he wrote. 'I hope you are both well. I am writing these few lines before work starts for the day. There is really very little news. The digs are comfortable enough and you are not to worry about me not having enough to eat, or about the monotony of the food. When I mentioned having stew seven times a week I was making a joke. Actually, we only have it about three or four times.'

He read over what he had written. The weekly letter home was a chore like cleaning his shoes or getting his hair cut that he left until it could be postponed no longer. The office was no place to write it. Without interruption, he could finish it in ten minutes. But Doreen was still combing her hair. Her mirror was propped against the telephone and she had five hair clips clamped between her soft mauve lips. This week she was experimenting with a blonde streak at the front. The rest of her hair was dark brown and she had a small moustache. Draper watched her comb the blonde streak into place. It made her look like a badger, he thought.

She twisted round to speak to him. 'Mr Fenning said you were to get into court in good time,' she said, 'You don't want to miss seeing the charge sheets again.'

'There's ten minutes,' said Draper. 'I won't be late.'

Doreen squinted fiercely at the mirror as she jabbed another hair pin into place. 'You only repeating what Mr Fenning said.'

And enjoying it, thought Draper. God help the poor sod who

gets caught by that hairy monster. He pulled the letter from the typewriter and crumpled it up. Dear John he extemporised, your father and I were most distressed when no letter came from you this morning. If you set aside five minutes every evening to jot down the day's news you would be able to send us such an interesting letter every week. But, of course, the fact of the matter is that once we are out of sight, we are out of mind too. Not again, thought Draper. I'll write it tonight. I can say that I was ill. No, not ill. Working. Working until 2 a.m. Keeping pace with the mighty roar of the presses. Gathering news for breakfast tables from here to Wigan Pier. That's how it is my dear parents, one must work hard to succeed as a journalist.

'And Mr Fenning said you should check every name and address with the officer in the case,' said Doreen. 'He said we didn't want to have any more mistakes like last week.'

Draper slid a notebook into his pocket. 'You know what Mr Fenning can do.'

Doreen spat delicately on to a block of mascara and dabbled a small brush in the mud 'I know that Mr Fenning can sack you if he has a mind to,' she said, starting operations on her right eye.

Draper felt his cheeks redden. Why he let himself get drawn into an argument, he had no idea. There was no point to it. He never won. And often he was forced into shameful retreat. Doreen had a gift for selecting the unanswerable phrase, or rather, the phrase which he lacked the guts to answer in the way it deserved. What he should say now he knew, was 'Mr Fenning can stuff his job.' But he would never say it. Mr Fenning might hear.

It was a spring day. Pale primrose sunlight slanted down through the grating in the pavement and showed up the dust on the desk top. The office was in the basement below Romani's Café, a small steamy cave opposite the court. It was not, as Fenning sometimes admitted, an ideal office. It was dark, it was dusty, and in the back room, where the yard level met the window, it was damp. When it rained, water coursed merrily down the inside wall. There was also something wrong with

the plumbing. A cracked pipe below the paving stones released a steady seepage of moisture that crawled up the walls and over the ceiling leaving in its wake tide marks like the contours of a mountain range. Years before, when the pipe began to leak, someone had started to keep check on the progress of the damp, rimming each invasion in pencil, and giving the date. The custom now had the quality of a ritual, respected and observed by every employee of Fenning's. In five years the tide marks had reached the centre of the ceiling. The room smelled like a distempered sewer.

On dry days Fenning defended the office. It was cheap, and it was central, five minutes from Fleet Street and close to its main source of news, the court across the road. There was also the advantage of having the café overhead. Meals could be eaten on the premises provided that stomachs were strong, and time was short.

Romani was dead and gone. His successor was named Joe Teal, a massive man, who wore a white barber's coat, and cleaned his nails with a matchstick. His home was at Shepherd's Bush, and his wife ran a tailoring business.

The café was a sideline. 'Something to occupy my time,' he said. 'Although I could do better watching pigs at a trough.' Mr Teal worked the cash register and looked hygienic. A brood of rats lived behind the meat safe, and when the kitchen was overcrowded jellies were left to set on the floor of the lavatory.

'Cup of tea,' said Draper.

He was cutting it fine, but to the last he resisted starting the day's work.

Mr Teal dropped his two pennies into the cash drawer as though they were contaminated. Busy today, he said, nodding towards the court.

Draper glanced at the queue, waiting for the doors to open. There were about fifty people there; a group of African students, with striped scarves round their necks, girls in white nylon jackets and half a dozen of the regular drunks.

'Crime exerts a great attraction,' said Mr Teal.

Draper grunted. Mr Teal made the remark five times a week,

always in the same profound way, as though he had discovered an eternal truth that revealed a new facet each time it was inspected.

The tea was awful, but Draper went on drinking it. It was really an experiment. In six months he had never found a tea leaf in his cup, and he was still curious to know how this could happen. It did not look like tea, he thought. The colour lay somewhere between brown and grey. The flavour was sweet and oily. He fished hopefully with his spoon and roused a thin swirl of sediment. There was still no sign of a leaf.

'Did you know, Mr Teal,' he said. 'In Tibet they crush their tea to powder, mix it with ox-blood, and bake it in bricks. Then they boil it up with rancid butter.'

Mr Teal nodded impassively. 'Some people,' he said 'have curious tastes.'

The morning went on a long time. Draper sat at the end of the press bench and drew caricatures of the magistrate. The man's name was Budleigh; a short, savage little man, with a face like an over-weight jockey. In half an hour he had dealt with six prostitutes, five drunks, an assault on the police, and a case of shop-lifting. Then, with two hours to go until his lunch appointment, he lingered over a brothel-keeper who had begged his solicitor to let him plead guilty, and was now shivering miserably in the rags of his innocence.

'... opened the door of the room, and there in bed together were the woman known as Alice Hooker and a man referred to as X', recited a police sergeant.

Budleigh rolled a silver pencil between his fingers. 'Were they asleep?' he asked.

'No, sir.'

'Were they married?'

'No, sir.'

Budleigh wrote something down on his blotter. 'I think those are relevant facts, sergeant,' he said.

Draper filled in two more squares of a newspaper crossword, and then foundered. 'It isn't always the best young people who are presented here' he read. In five letters.

The jailer leaned over his shoulder 'Court,' he hissed. 'Co-u-r-t' Draper filled it in

The jailer still breathed down his neck, and Draper glanced up 'You do it,' he suggested 'You're much better than I am'

'Sure?'

'Positive'

'You don't want it?'

Draper pressed the paper into his hands 'On the firm,' he said 'You had to be nice to the jailer

'In the presence of the accused, I questioned Miss Hooker,' said the sergeant 'In his presence and hearing she said "I give him £3 a time," and the accused said 'You bloody cow''

Budleigh raised his pencil like a baton 'Was he addressing you or the lady?' he inquired

Draper willed the wax to block up his ears There was still an hour to go, sixty minutes of steady drip from the little man in the red leather chair He shifted uncomfortably on the bench; solid oak and not a cushion in sight Tentatively he closed his eyes A yogi could sit on a bed of nails and feel no pain. All that was needed was concentration If he thought of something else, it might work

He thought of the letter he had to write Dear mother and father, I am sitting on a hard bench in a London court, where the walls are yellow, and the magistrate is a fool I am sorry that I forgot to send my underwear for you to wash last week I know it is harder for you to get clean when I wear it for weeks and weeks As you say, it is thoughtless and a bad habit, and the colour is exactly like soot No, I do not roll around the floor wearing it There must be something in the air London is a very dirty place.

Draper peered through his lashes Only five minutes gone Budleigh was sucking his pencil like a dummy Think of something else, he commanded himself.

He thought of what he would do that evening Saturday was always a problem. After paying his landlady, he had £4 to last him until next Friday. Out of that came fares, food, cigarettes, and beer. Six days to cover. Thirteen shillings a day, with two

shillings over. It was unjust; 23 years old and earning only seven pounds a week.

He was not bad-looking, not unintelligent. Medium height, fresh complexion (with a tendency to boils); straight brown hair, cut short, and good teeth. If he was a horse, thought Draper, he would fetch a good price. As it was, he was simply an ill-paid drudge.

The court was close and stuffy. Hot water rumbled in the radiators and a succession of doors and windows sealed off the cold, bright day. It was exactly five minutes to one (twenty minutes to his lunch appointment) when Mr Budleigh registered a conviction for brothel-keeping, and sentenced an excessively handsome Maltese named Spiteri to six months' imprisonment. Two women in the public gallery, instantly set up in competition to see who could throw the most convincing fit of hysterics. And Draper, who had been fast asleep, woke up with a start.

Harry Troy was in the office when Draper returned. He sat at the desk that afforded a view up through the pavement grating; a place which collected the heaviest deposit of grit in the office, but which had its compensations.

Draper raised his eyebrows, and Troy shook his head. 'No luck', he said. 'In half an hour I have counted forty pairs of legs, all in trousers. I don't believe that women walk on gratings.'

Doreen scowled at him over a cheese sandwich. 'You have a filthy mind,' she said. 'You want something better to do.'

'Doreen would never walk on a grating', said Troy. 'Instinctively she knows that down below is an evil-minded man whose only interest in life is to look up a young woman's skirt. It's a curious thing how all right-minded people invariably know how foul other people are.'

Draper opened his notebook. 'What papers go to Willesden?' he asked.

Troy disregarded him. 'Doreen is the rightest-minded person I know,' he said. 'She works below ground. She reads our reports of robbery, incest, and rape. The greater part of her wages come

from the publicity we give to other people's misdoings. But she remains unsullied.' He swivelled round in his chair. 'Whenever I think of Doreen - and I think of her night and day - I think of her as one of the pure in heart'

'The papers for Willesden,' said Draper.

Troy waved his hand impatiently. 'Look them up. Look at the card for Willesden.'

Draper flipped through the card index which named the local papers circulating in every London district. The cards were dirty and dog-eared. 'We could do with a new set of these,' he complained.

'Doreen is too busy,' said Troy. 'She is wholly occupied in guarding the morals of the office. If you want new cards, you'll have to make them out yourself.'

Doreen brushed a scattering of crumbs on to the floor and carefully folded her grease-proof paper 'I take my orders from Mr Fenning,' she said. 'Not from his employees.'

Troy inclined his head in mock humility. 'True, true. Straight from the godhead. No other offers considered. When, by the way, is the lord and master expected?'

'Mr Fenning said he would be in after lunch. He was driving Mrs Fenning to her mother's this morning.'

'Four o'clock,' estimated Troy, 'so we frig about here till then.'

'Mr Fenning said there was no need for me to wait,' said Doreen. 'He told me I could go after lunch if there was no story for the evenings.'

'Is there any story for the evening?' asked Troy.

Draper shook his head.

'Then go,' said Troy. 'Don't inflame us by sitting there in all your beauty. Didn't anyone ever tell you that Saturday afternoon was the most dangerous time of the week. Terrible peril for a girl in a basement...'

He watched her pack her bucket bag with magazines, knitting, and thermos flask. 'Watch out for the grating,' he said.

Doreen took her coat from the only hanger in the cupboard. 'I always watch out for people beneath me,' she said.

Troy threw up his hands like a revivalist. 'Oh my God,' he said. 'Dig that crazy comeback. Draper, you churl, acknowledge true wit. Get on your feet. Bow to the lady.' He relaxed as Doreen clumped heavily up the stairs. 'What a cow,' he said. 'A genuine cud-chewing cow. Where do they come from? Why do we get them? Why can't we have a sexy, intelligent, agreeable, emancipated woman. One with her own flat, her own income, and a passion for journalists.' He squinted up through the grating. 'About twenty-seven years old,' he said. 'Nothing under twenty-five.'

Draper sat hunched over his typewriter. 'Why?'

'Responsibility,' said Troy. 'At twenty-five a woman is on the verge of maturity. In all probability she has already had a lover. She knows what is what. She can make her own decisions, and if anything goes wrong you don't have to carry the entire can.'

'I'd never thought of that,' said Draper.

Troy shrugged his shoulders 'You learn as you grow older.'

'How old are you?' asked Draper.

'Quite irrelevant,' said Troy. 'Knowledge comes from experience. Pitt was Prime Minister at twenty-three.'

'How old are you, Harry?'

'Dylan Thomas was a bloody good poet at nineteen.'

'How old, Harry?'

'I shall be twenty next month,' said Troy.

Basil Fenning, sole proprietor of Fenning's Features, arrived at his office at five o'clock. Troy and Draper sat on opposite sides of the desk by the window, their feet side by side on the desk top. The electric fire was full on, and cigarette smoke hung in the air in thick blue layers.

Fenning flicked off two bars of the fire with a broad nicotine-finger. 'It's like an oven down here,' he said. 'You sit there like bloody lords and don't think about the bills.' He tapped his chest, trussed and buttoned in hairy tweed. 'I pay them,' he said. 'I pay them while you sit around doing sweet f.a.'

'It's all done,' said Troy 'Nothing for the Sundays Nothing for the evenings Half a dozen local stories, ready for posting. You want to see the blacks?'

Fenning bowed his head meekly 'If I might be permitted' He leafed through Draper's reports of the day's cases, his shiny, pink face stiff with disgust 'What about this?' he demanded 'What about this brothel keeper? Why haven't you done a special for you know who'

Draper swung his feet off the desk 'They've had a copy of the local story,' he said

Fenning stuck out his jaw 'What do you mean, local story? Look laddie, they pay us a retainer That entitles them to special service They want the whole carcass The hide, horns, guts and all They'll do their own carving' He tossed the flimsy sheets into Draper's lap 'Do it again,' he said 'Do it properly this time'

One day, thought Draper I'll throw the typewriter at your head 'It's after five,' he said 'There's not much point, is there. The story's not so hot

Fenning leaned forward his hands flat on the desk 'You wouldn't know anything was hot until it burned you,' he said 'Just get it done and don't argue' He turned to Troy. 'Who's on tomorrow?'

Troy glanced at the typewritten rota gummed on the wall. 'Brewer's on call He knows about it'

'He'd better,' said Fenning He glared round the office 'It's like a bloody pig-sty I'm away for a few hours and the whole place is a shambles'

'The cleaner didn't come today,' said Troy, mildly.

'Didn't come? Why not?'

Draper paused in his typing 'Her daughter was getting married We were all invited to the wedding'

'I don't suppose anyone went,' said Fenning

'No,' said Troy 'No one went.'

'And why not?'

'I don't follow Why should anyone go?'

Fenning drew a deep breath. 'Laddie,' he inquired. 'What is your profession?'

'Reporter,' said Troy.

'And yours?'

'Reporter,' said Draper.

'And do neither of you know that a wedding is always news to someone? That there are always names at a wedding? That names are news? And the news sells papers?' Fenning waited for the information to sink in. 'That wedding would have been worth about a couple of quid to the office. More with pictures.' He lit a cigarette, without offering the packet around. 'Another thing. You never know what's going to happen at a wedding. The preacher might be arrested. The groom might drop dead.' He blew a long scroll of smoke at the light bulb and watched it blossom like a wreath. 'I remember one time when the bride was rushed off to the vestry, and the matron of honour had to turn midwife. Nice little kid it was. Earned me about a hundred quid.'

'What were you doing there?' asked Troy. 'Were you on the job?'

Fenning squinted along the barrel of his cigarette. 'No I wasn't,' he said. 'And that proves my point. I wasn't supposed to be on the job at all. I was the best man.'

Troy swilled the last half inch of bitter around the bottom of his glass. 'God knows why I stay,' he said, 'there's no kind of future here. We churn out the same kind of crap week after week. We cover the courts. We go to the inquests. We make the same old rounds, and for what? In the last month all I've produced is a handful of newsbriefs and half a column in the Green Badge Journal.' He swallowed his beer in one gulp. 'Journalists are supposed to meet such interesting people. Who started that little fantasy? Where are they, these interesting people?' He spun a florin on the bar. 'Same again please.'

Draper surrendered his glass and said nothing. Troy exploded once a week, predictably and to a pattern. 'Experience,' he prompted.

Troy followed the pointer. 'Fenning talks about experience,' he said, 'it's the oldest excuse in the world for sweated labour. Keep your nose to the grindstone, laddie, and pretty soon your

face will be perfectly flat.' He tilted Draper's head into profile. 'Think how handsome you'd be with a flat face.'

Draper fingered the coins in his pocket. Another round would break into his week's budget. 'I'm off,' he said, 'can't keep the landlady waiting.'

Troy caught his arm. 'Have another.' He waved aside Draper's objections. 'On me. I don't have to depend on Fenning's pittance.' He ordered two whiskys. 'God bless doting parents,' he said.

Draper gave thanks. Troy was the only son of a wholesale grocer, who regarded his son's period in journalism as a fairly inexpensive sowing of wild oats before he took his place amongst the crates of breakfast food. Troy encouraged the assumption: it made living a lot easier. Hammer toes had preserved him from the army, and for the past two years, he had worked for – or had been entertained by – Fenning's Features. His work, despite his complaints, was excellent. An allowance from his father insulated him from the grind of the agency business. He worked because it amused him, and much of the amusement came from the fact that Fenning knew little of his background.

Draper's ambition, to walk out of the office one day, after tipping the wastepaper basket over Fenning's head, was already within Harry Troy's grasp. He could afford the luxury. But to postpone the day, to watch Fenning draw the hook deeper down with every insult, merely sharpened the pleasure of anticipation.

'When are you on again?' he asked.

Draper swallowed the whisky that had collected in an expensive, burning pool under his tongue. 'Monday.'

'What are you doing tonight?'

'Not a clue,' said Draper. 'I'm pretty broke.'

Troy hesitated. 'I don't know whether you'd be interested,' he said, 'but there's a poetry reading group I go to sometimes ...'

'Poetry,' said Draper.

Troy grinned deprecatingly. 'It's not so terrifying,' he said. 'It's an excuse really. There's drinks, and girls. And it's free.'

You're supposed to put something in the kitty or take a bottle along I'll do that.' He buttoned his coat. 'What about it?'

'What time?'

'Eight o'clock.'

'Where?'

'I'll pick you up,' offered Troy

Draper thought of his thin wallet. Four pounds minus two bitters left him with three pounds, eighteen and sixpence. There was nothing to lose. 'All right,' he said.

Draper's room was on the fourth floor. The windows were level with the tops of an avenue of plane trees, and already the leaves were unclenching into restless green hands. Behind the trees was a strip of scabby turf, a perimeter of iron railings, and then, the main road and a wireless factory. The leaves made an effective screen, and the terrace was a private place.

'It has class,' Mrs Barrow told Draper when he took the room. 'I take no riff-raff here. Just professional gentlemen, who appreciate a good home.' Nervously, Draper had murmured his appreciation. Mrs Barrow was a huge pink widow with hair the colour of egg flip, and a fondness for bright rayon dresses. The house was dark, with chipped brown paintwork, and Mrs Barrow stood out from her setting like a fluorescent slab of bacon. For £2.10s a week she supplied bed, breakfast, and an evening meal. Draper was still learning to call it dinner. 'Super,' Mrs Barrow had told him, 'is a light snack before retiring.'

The room was small and shabby. Pigeons sat on the window sill. There was no fireplace, and the bathroom and lavatory were two floors down. There was a bed, a wardrobe, a table, and a chair. Beneath the bed was a chamber-pot, daubed with red roses. Mrs Barrow had nudged it with her toe. 'Most of my gentlemen prefer to perform their ablutions downstairs,' she remarked. Naturally, starved Draper. After two months, drunk or sober, he had never dared to make use of the ornament.

There was a half hour's wait before dinner. Street lamps bloomed suddenly between the trees, and shadows striped the window. Draper slipped off his shoes and lit a cigarette. He had to be careful. Ten a day was his ration, and even that was more than he could afford. He watched the smoke crawl up the window-pane and stream out with the evening. Everything cost money. Everything he did was rationed, arranged, per-

mitted, or denied by pounds, shillings and pence. He was single and independent, a provincial boy on the loose in London; it sounded all right, but money was the great debunker.

His mother wrote angry, anxious letters. Had he met any nice girls? Was he keeping his shoes in good repair? (run-down heels, she reminded him, make a smart suit shoddy). Draper left the questions unanswered. Girls cost money, shoe-repairs cost money. The questions became monotonous. What did she want to know that he had not already made clear?

He flopped down on to the bed. The wardrobe door was half open and he glimpsed a pile of dirty shirts, underpants, and socks. That was another thing. Laundries were expensive. Send your washing home, said his mother. But postage was expensive too. The cigarette end scorched his lips, and he stubbed it out on the bed-frame. The shirt he was wearing had lasted him for two days. If he scrubbed over the collar and cuffs, it would see him through the weekend. There was a hole in one of his socks, but no one was likely to see him with his shoes off.

Draper had become increasingly aware of frayed cuffs and inadequate darning. He could tell at a glance whether the crease in a pair of trousers had been made by an iron, a trouser press, or merely by two sheets of cardboard beneath a mattress. The last time he had taken a girl out he had noticed that her gloves were grimy, and that the fabric between two of the fingers was split. Sympathy had followed recognition. Like had excused like. And then he had rebelled. What had seemed pathetic was sluttish. His own frowsty condition was produced, not simply by lack of money, but by the inertia bred of accepting the situation. Like a prisoner kept on short rations, he sensed his steady deterioration. His morale was low. But what he needed was not an alliance with a fellow prisoner, but help from outside. He did not see the girl again. Twice he made excuses when she telephoned him at the office, and the third time he asked Troy to take the call. 'He's away ill,' Troy said, 'he has boils all over his face.' The girl did not reply. The receiver clicked down, and she did not telephone again.

It was a pity, thought Draper. She was a nice enough kid,

with ragged brown hair and big spaniel eyes. But someone had told her she looked like Audrey Hepburn and in a fey way she tried to live up to it. Her home was at Fulburn, too far away really with a Mum, Dad, brother and sister to make every mile count. There had been a bit of knee trembling in the front porch but that was as far as it went. The next girl he decided, was going to be a Harry Lloyd model with income and accommodation heading the prospectus. It happened sometimes. When he was eighteen and in the army he had been picked up by a fur-coated woman who had sat next to him in the train. For twelve hours he had wondered what he should pay her and at the end of it she had packed him off with five pounds in his shirt pocket. But it was not likely to happen again. The way his luck was running, he could be living next door to a nymphomaniac without any results.

Draper rolled off the bed and switched on the light. Two floor down he heard the bolt slam on the bathroom door and a happy burst in break a *bad* *bad* *bad* of *span*. That was Billany, a black-headed engineer from Dublin who was a champion weightlifter and a user of violently centred cologne. For half an hour he would wallow in hot water plucking sprouts of hair from his nostril with a pair of tweezers and going through his repertoire of songs. An evening session included *Cuban Pet*, *Penues from Heaven*, *jet* *jet* *jet* and *South of the Border*. Morning inspired *The Earl As* *nding* and late at night after a session at Mooney's in the Strand *Danny Boy* seeped through the floorboard.

Once he had taken Draper to a dance at the Holborn Hall. The band was loud, the drinks were soft, there was a mixed smell of dust, disinfectant and sweat. Draper stood with his back to the wall and watched the tight-sweatered girls jiving impassively with their sideburned partners. Their feet tamped out intricate jazz patterns. Their faces were rapt and frozen. Draper felt like an outsider. Only able to dance a waltz, he lacked the assurance of Billany, who lured his way about the floor, reeking of sweat, with his girl firmly performing her own steps out of range of his clumsy feet. The whole thing was a ritual which he did not understand.

When a tough little brunette, her nylon slip edging through her split skirt, hauled him into the mass of dancers, he panicked. 'I can't do it,' he stammered. Instantly she let him go, stared at him briefly and contemptuously, and sketched in the air a perfect square. He spent the rest of the evening miserably sucking a Coca-Cola through straws that soon dissolved into waxy pulp.

But with Troy, he thought, things would be different. There were possibilities, and that was the great thing. Troy would look after him. He would come to no harm. The dinner gong boomed distantly up the well of the stairs and Draper opened his door and sniffed the air. There was no need to hurry. It was stew again.

'The tie is a mistake,' said Troy.

'It's silk,' said Draper defensively.

Troy shook his head. 'It could be cloth of gold, but it's still a mistake. You look like a clerk from Bradford up for a look at the big city. Why can't you be more casual?'

Draper undid two of his three jacket buttons. 'Like this?'

'Don't be rash,' said Troy. 'You might freeze to death.'

'This suit cost me twenty-five quid,' said Draper. 'I chose the pattern myself. I ordered three buttons on the jacket. I went for two fittings...'

'And it'll last for years,' encouraged Troy.

'It'll have to.'

'Look at me,' said Troy. 'How do I look?'

Draper stepped back as, unselfconsciously, Troy paraded for inspection. He was tall and slim, with fair hair combed to one side. He wore tight, straw-coloured slacks, a dark red shirt, a fawn leather jacket, and suede boots. 'Very pretty,' said Draper.

Troy clicked his tongue. 'Just what I'd expect you to say. Very pretty. The correct, stuffy, provincial note. Why can't you relax? Fenning's not breathing down your neck. You've got spots, but you're not a monster. Some poor cow might even think you handsome. But you're buttoned up, wrapped up, trussed in a Bradford chastity belt.'

Draper held up his hand and grinned amiably 'You think I should dress like you?

Why not' said Troy

The best reason in the world' said Draper 'I'd look like a bloody pouf'

It was a soft spring evening like twilight was settling over London and shop sign blinked their messages along Earl's Court Road. A dog trotted busily ahead of them sniffing at doorways. The smell of coffee wafted from an espresso and empty taxi their meters glowing like little lamps drove slowly by begging for custom.

Draper felt anticipation rise in his chest like gassy lemonade. 'What'll be there?' he asked.

The usual crowd' said Troy. Gwen Adams - it's her house. Terry Cook. Bernard Crab. Connie Hobart. Peter Flack. All the people you'd expect and about twenty five free loaders.

'Are they poet?' asked Draper.

Some of them' said Troy. Terry Cook is a little peasant from Chicago who's moved into the Mallin racket. Connie Hobart's a lip-d Catholic who's making a good thing out of medicine. Bernard Cook is a hard working young angry. And Peter Flack has just done a book on Melville with a twenty page prologue in French verse.

'Are any of them any good?'

'Good!' said Troy. 'Of course they're a lot of them are phonies and more of them are bores. They hang around Gwen because there's always a drink going free and sometimes a meal. But they like her. And they get their work done.'

'But what about you?' asked Draper. 'Why do you go there?'

Troy gripped his shoulder in a parody of an old uncle. 'To see life. To watch the animals feeding. He slapped Draper on the back. 'Use your loaf' he said. 'Where there's culture there's crumpet. Girls who mix life with their literature. You get the point?'

Draper nodded uneasily. 'It sounds like a knocking shop' he said.

Troy wagged his finger. 'Not a knocking shop' he said.

'There you pay. Here there's no charge. It's personality that counts.'

Personality, thought Draper. The quality I have not got. 'Don't leave me alone,' he said. 'Whatever you do, don't leave me alone.'

It was a tall, dim room with a Picasso poster on one wall and a lot of people sitting on the floor. Layers of smoke hung in the air like a drawing of cliff strata, and by a big electric fire sat a woman in a red blouse and black velvet slacks. Four young men sprawled at her feet. It looked, thought Draper, like the start of a very sedate orgy.

'That's Gwen,' hissed Troy. 'I'll introduce you.'

Dropping on one knee, he lifted the woman's white hand and kissed it. 'Gwen, darling,' he said. 'What marvellous pants. You look like something out of *Death in the Afternoon*.'

Short-sightedly, Gwen peered down at him. 'Just death, dear. That's how I look.'

Troy beckoned Draper in. 'A friend of mine, Gwen. John Draper. Works with me. I hope you don't mind.'

'Everyone's welcome, you know that, darling. Everyone but the landlord.'

Draper barked away, mumbling his thanks. In a corner he saw a man with a trim black beard pouring gin into a glass. Purposefully, he moved in that direction. His sense of security always increased with a glass in his hand.

'Do you think . . .' he began.

The beard swung in his direction. 'Yes.'

'Do you think I could have a drink,' said Draper.

Which bottle?

Draper smiled deprecatingly. 'Oh, any bottle.'

'Which bottle is yours?'

Embarrassment sluiced through him like a gulp of scalding cocoa. Take a bottle or put something in the kitty. Troy had said. But Troy was supposed to have seen to it. 'My friend . . .' he stammered. 'Harry Troy. I think he brought a bottle.'

'Better ask him which, then,' said the man with the beard. 'All these are reserved.'

Draper looked for the door. His impulse was to get out, to flee the scene of his humiliation. It was too bloody silly. Four pounds into seven days left nothing over for a bottle. Troy had promised. Troy did not have to depend on Jennings' Features.

'Harry,' he said angrily, tugging the sleeve of a leather jacket. 'Where's the bottle?' A strange face turned to meet him. 'Sorry,' said Draper. The room had filled up and the noise had grown to a small roar. An inch away from Draper's ear a girl wearing spectacles with frames like a Halloween mask, shrieked with laughter. Draper whirled round, to see a cigarette being stabbed emphatically towards his right eye. He recoiled and trod heavily on someone's heel. 'Christ!' exclaimed a woman's voice. Draper pulled in his stomach and retreated.

With his back to the wall he looked miserably about him. There were men in heavy roll-neck sweaters and men in corduroy jackets. There were girls in turtin slacks, and girls in baggy dresses with knee-level ropes, of none that they twirled like bicycle chains. Voices blended into what Draper savagely identified as an intellectual day.

A huge portly poet took his hand. 'Didn't we meet at Spender?' he asked.

Draper took stock of his nicotine-crowned teeth, and the shock of grey hair showing beneath his nylon shirt. 'We've never met,' he said proudly.

'Never? But surely you write.'

Draper nodded. 'Oh yes,' he said. 'I write.' The poet smiled encouragement. 'Where?'

'Hovds list,' said Draper. 'The Daily Film Renter. A small market but exclusive.'

The poet dug a finger inside his shirt and vigorously scratched his chest. For several seconds he seemed absorbed in a private calculation. 'Tell me,' he said at last, 'do they pay?'

Harry Troy lay hidden behind a crowded divan, his head resting on a cushion, his left arm cradling a bottle, and his free hand clamped about the thigh of Cynthia Aston.

'Cyn,' he said, 'we ought to find Draper.'

Cynthia glanced down at him. 'They're going to start reading in a minute.'

'All the more important,' said Troy. 'We can't let him sit through that alone.'

Cynthia hovered over him like a lean and tolerant goddess and Troy rolled his head, to see more clearly the line of her breasts. He reached up to touch them but Cynthia caught his hand. 'No,' she said. 'Don't be a little lecher.'

Troy made no move, and she dug her nails into his wrist. 'I mean it,' she said. 'Take your hand away.'

Troy grinned widely. 'What if I don't?'

Cynthia bent down, so that their faces were almost touching. 'Either you take your hand away or I'm going to walk out,' she threatened.

Troy patted her lightly on the chest, an inch above her breast, and then let his hand drop. 'You wouldn't walk out on me,' he said. 'You wouldn't be so stuffy.'

He heaved himself to his feet and slowly buttoned his jacket. 'I'll find Draper,' he said. 'Are you staying where you are?'

'I've got a seat,' said Cynthia. 'I don't want to lose it'

Troy shrugged his shoulders 'Just as you like.' He turned away, and the swirl of fisherman's knit and corduroy engulfed him.

Cynthia lit a cigarette, squinting against the smoke. Automatically she cautioned herself. It was the wrong thing to do. Squinting deepened the fine mesh of wrinkles around the eyes. She felt time net her face, the invisible tourniquet tighten at the base of her skull, and the fine cords of age bite into the soft skin.

She straightened her back. She was too thin to slump, and Harry noticed a graceless posture, just as he noticed fatigue and headaches. The clamour of conversation slowly died. One by one, the wall lamps were turned off, until only a working light glared harshly down on to a lectern. The first reader stepped forward, and as he smoothed the creases from his manuscript, Troy and Draper stumbled across the room to sit side by side at Cynthia's feet.

Draper belched quietly and blessed the darkness. He was, he realised, a little drunk. The whisky bottle between his knees was two thirds empty, a third less than when Troy had handed it to him. With difficulty, he fished his handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his sweating face. His eyes felt sandy. His tongue was definitely too big for his mouth. Somewhere in the darkness a voice was reciting poetry. It had been doing so for a long time, thought Draper. He shifted his hams from one knot in the floorboards to another that was less assertive, and tried to concentrate.

'Remember a little at a time,' intoned the voice.

'Slowly revolve the record
cracked and weary with reiteration.
Project the film without a title,
the episodic quickie
running the circuit of frustration
and fusing at the touch of old regret.'

'Who is it reading!?' hissed Draper.

No one answered but Cynthia pressed her finger to his lips. Fuzzily he wondered what would happen if he bit it. 'I asked who was reading,' he said more loudly. A semi-circle of faces flipped round towards him like cards on a dark baise table. 'Shut up, for Christ's sake,' said Troy. 'You'll have us thrown out.'

Unperturbed, the reader went on:

'Perhaps it would be better to forget,
and easier, for the past,
which, when it happened,
was not glamorous, seems to have been
an endless succession of soft beds,
good food, and kind women'

Methodically Draper licked his right index finger and moistened each eye in turn. Suddenly it had become imperative that he should see who the reader was. He leaned forward on his knuckles like a cautious ape, and then recklessly straightened up. For a second he saw the reader, one hand holding his manu-

script, the other excavating within his open shirt. 'I was talking to him,' he told Troy. 'It's the one with the hairy chest.' He pointed triumphantly, ignoring the rustle of protest, and then as Troy hauled his ankle, sprawled sideways on to Cynthia's lap.

Carefully she lowered him to the floor. 'Stay there,' she ordered. Draper felt her hands on his shoulders, and the steady light grooming of her fingers through his hair, soothing him, keeping him steady in one place. He reached up and instantly she caught his hand. 'Be still,' she whispered. The poem went on and Draper did not move. The hand that held his was strong and warm and when he kissed it, he could feel a small vein jumping in the wrist.

'It was Blackpool that let me down,' complained Basil Fenning 'I was just about counting the bloody divvy when Matthews missed the ball Can you believe it He missed the ball Wizard of dribble my arse'

'I gave it up years ago,' said Brewer 'It used to cost me a quid a week I tried it all ways - perms, syndicates, the lot The only time I came up there were about twenty thousand other winners I got one pound two shillings and fourpence ha'penny. That finished me' Ash from his cigarette tumbled down his grease spotted tie, and he brushed it away with a gesture that was both automatic and resigned Brewer was a heavy smoker, who looked as though his face, hands, and clothing had been immersed in nicotine solutions of varying strengths The index fingers of both hands were the colour of overdone toast, his face was like a long sallow lemon, and his shirt and suit were glazed with a fine sepia grime Once, Bill Brewer had worked in Fleet Street Now, several sad years later, he was chief reporter for Fenning's Features

'I see they used that brothel story,' said Fenning 'That lazy little sod Draper was going to give them the local version'

'He's been told enough times' said Brewer 'I reckon he costs us more than he makes' Grudgingly, he stubbed out his cigarette The Monday morning inquest on football and the failings of the staff had run its course Work began in ten minutes' time

Rain pattered through the pavement grating and furrowed the dust on the window. In the back room Draper stood on a desk top measuring the latest advance in the ceiling damp. 'Nearly half an inch since Saturday, he called 'We should reach the other wall by Christmas'

'Think you'll be here to see it?' asked Troy.

Draper pencilled the new water-mark and added the date.

'Not with any luck,' he said. He had spent the greater part of Sunday in bed. Troy and Cynthia had taken him home by taxi on Saturday night, and obstinately he had refused any help in climbing the stairs to his room. It had been an arrogant decision. On the second landing his knees had buckled, and Billany, returning hot and scented from a dance, had carried him the rest of the way and tucked him gently under the blankets.

'I must owe you some cash,' said Draper.

Troy waved the suggestion aside. 'It was my idea you came. You don't owe me a thing.'

'Did you get back all right?'

'Oh yes,' said Troy. 'I got back.'

'What about Cynthia?'

'Cynthia got back,' said Troy. 'I made sure of that.'

Draper was puzzled. 'Are you trying to be cryptic?' he demanded.

'Cryptic?' said Troy. 'What a bloody silly word. I was answering a simple question. If you want to know any more, why can't you ask properly. I took her home and I stayed the night. Does that solve the mystery?'

Draper stood speechless, his head jammed against the ceiling. He felt his face turn scarlet and a flake of plaster drop neatly between his collar and his neck. 'I didn't know,' he said. 'I didn't guess. I'm sorry I asked.'

'You didn't ask,' said Troy. 'I just told you. Now for God's sake get down from there. You look like patience on a monument.'

Meekly Draper obeyed. 'Was it the first time?' he asked. 'You and Cynthia I mean?'

Troy shook his head. 'It's an old story. We've been on and off for about a year now.'

'And you never told me.'

'Why should I for God's sake,' demanded Troy. 'What's it to do with you?'

'She's older than you, thought Draper. 'A lot older. No reason,' he said. 'I'm just surprised. It's not like you.'

Troy clicked his tongue impatiently. 'Cynthia's all right,' he said. 'There's simply nothing to talk about.' He glanced at his

wrist watch and turned to the door. 'Coming for a cup of tea before we start?'

Draper followed him up the narrow stairs. Someone had spilled potato peelings on the top step and Troy kicked the litter to one side. 'She likes you,' he said idly 'She thought you had an honest face.'

Cynthia Afton sat in a second floor back bedroom in King's Road having her fortune told. The king of hearts, nine of spades, the four of hearts; each card flipped into line on the mahogany table. Cynthia breathed deeply. The room was above a bakery, and the smell of new bread overlaid the stale overnight scents of gin, bedclothes, and face cream.

'It's over a month since your last visit,' said Mrs Pargeter, slapping the ten of clubs into ragged alignment with the rest of the pack. 'You used to be much more regular.'

'I've been away,' Cynthia lied. She sounds like a doctor, she thought, half resentfully. An old iron-haired woman, with crooked stockings and a ragged hemline, she had no business to sound so professional. But in a way, it was reassuring. The room was untidy, screwed up face tissues littered the bedside table. The counterpane had been carelessly pulled up over rumpled sheets. Copies of *Horoscope* were stacked on the floor. But in her tatty bird's nest of a flatlet, Mrs Pargeter presided like a consultant.

'Changes ahead,' said Mrs Pargeter, prodding the cards with a daintily grimed finger. 'New faces, the end of a friendship, something to do with money.'

Cynthia fidgeted with the tip of her gloves. 'You told me that last time.'

'Did I, my dear? I must have been forecasting even more in advance than usual.' Mrs Pargeter chuckled to herself indulgently, and scanned through the cards again. 'That's what they say. Nothing good, nothing bad. Just changes.'

Cynthia got up and looked through the window. The view was depressing, wet roof tops, chimneys barbed with television aerials, an occasional sooty shrub. The pane misted with her breath and she wiped it clean. The dull morning outside and

the table lamp behind her printed her reflection on the glass, a woman of thirty-six, with short, bristling black hair, a pale thin face, heavy eyes and a wide tremulous mouth. Her upper lip was short, the nostrils paper fine. Mrs Pargeter switched off the light and the reflection disappeared.

'I'm expecting another client,' she said. 'I think the rain's slackened off.' Pointedly she stood by the door while Cynthia counted out fifteen shillings and put the money on the table. 'Try and make it more regular,' she urged. 'We can get better results if we keep at it.'

Cynthia buttoned her coat. 'I'll let you know,' she said. 'I never seem to have the time.' Suddenly the room revolted her. Never again, she told herself. Two years was too long to play at fortune telling. What there was to know about herself she knew already. The thought that Mrs Pargeter had explored her past and her future, the grubby hands, each finger nail burdened with dirt - spelling out her secrets from the cards, humiliated her beyond endurance. 'I'll let you know,' she repeated.

Mrs Pargeter opened the door, and stood aside to let her pass. 'I thought of you last night,' she called, when Cynthia was half-way down the stairs. 'I saw your husband on the television.' She leaned over the banisters, a rope of imitation pearls swinging like a noose beneath her chin. 'I said I saw your husband,' she shrieked, 'tearing into that man who was rude to the Queen. He said horsewhipping was too good.' The street door slammed, and stuffily, Mrs Pargeter stepped back, settling the pearls around her neck. 'That horsewhipping was too good for him,' she concluded. Every week she made the pilgrimage to the television lounge of her bridge club to watch Guy Afton face the nation in his programme, 'Brass Tacks'. Plump, pipe smoking and masterful, he was one of her heroes. Mrs Pargeter could never understand why, three years ago to the month, Cynthia Afton had deserted him.

Even the leaves of the rubber plants were dull with damp. Cynthia spooned chunky brown sugar into her espresso, and tried to ignore the back page of her neighbour's *Daily Sketch*.

TV SAGE SAYS CHEERS FOR THE QUEEN announced the headline, and beneath the bold black type was a picture of Guy, as she had so often seen him, his pink face clenched in its most photogenic scowl, his pipe pointing like a gun barrel at the camera, and his thinning hair dramatically awry.

She leaned forward to read the small print. "... switchboard was jammed when 2,000 viewers telephoned to congratulate TV's toughest commentator. "What I said was entirely unrehearsed," Afton declared late last night. "I simply couldn't keep quiet."

Cynthia smiled her disbelief. Nothing that Guy Afton did was ever unrehearsed. She remembered the tape recorder in their bedroom; the big mirror, harshly lit to reveal any skin imperfections; the carefully indexed book of jokes; the invective gutted without acknowledgement from Pope and Dr Johnson. Everything that Guy did was calculated to the last detail. His indignation was only one facet of a personality that swivelled obediently in the wake of public opinion. And not always in the wake; with a huckster's instinct Guy anticipated demand. He guessed well, and the result was his reputation as a popular seer. But rudeness had made his name, and in this respect, thought Cynthia, he enjoyed a supreme advantage; he had always been a natural boor.

She had been a widow when they married. Her first husband, a bomber pilot, had died in one of the raids on Berlin. Lonely and bored, Cynthia had been besieged by a man she hardly liked. But Guy could be persuasive. In those days, he counted his audience in thousands. His personal opinion column in a Sunday paper was remarkable only for its bad temper, and for the eagerness with which it indulged the whims of the proprietor. Cynthia had been the one to point out he could do bigger things. And Guy had believed her.

Letting her coffee grow cold, Cynthia stared at the picture of the monster she had made. She had given him ideas, organized his campaigns, and written his copy. When television beckoned, she advised him to make the break. Then the organization had taken over, and Guy asked her to marry him.

Even now, she hardly knew why she had agreed. Her role as

tutor had demanded all her energies, and in return had given her the satisfaction of seeing the new man emerge, pink and prosperous from the old uncouth shell. Suddenly schooldays were over and once more, she was at a loose, unhappy end.

They married quickly and just as quickly the quarrels began. Lying in bed one night she had listened with rising fury as Guy prepared his next programme. His accent was giving him trouble. For the personality he had adopted – blunt, John Bullish and man in the street – he needed a regional burr that would disguise his own petulant cockney.

'How now brown cow,' he intoned to the hand microphone. 'Har nar brahn car. How noo broon coo.' He played the tape back and listened plumbly. 'What do you think?' he appealed, 'it's there somewhere. Something homely, a bit of Somerset, a bit of Staffordshire perhaps just a trace of Tyneside.' He dug Cynthia in the ribs. 'Tell me what you think,' he ordered.

The pink tape delivered its alternative, and Guy leaped over her propped on one elbow. 'Well,' he demanded, 'what's it to be?'

She closed her eyes and nodded wearily down into the bed. Buy an atlas, she said, 'stick a pin in it, and start from there. I don't care if it's Lumburtoo.'

There was a long silence. For several seconds she expected him to strike her. Then the mattress relieved of his weight tipped her gently to one side. 'How now brown cow,' said the tape. 'Har nar brahn car.'

His hard fingers pinched her face and she winced with pain. 'You're the bloody cow,' said Guy, and you can start looking for another field.'

Six months later she had packed her bags and walked out. With some money of her own she ignored the letters from Guy's solicitors. Their dependence on each other was over. But still, she needed Guy less than he needed her. She had deprived him of the pleasure of putting her out and it was this that he found hard to forgive. Her strength lay in staying away. But in idleness she was prey to her own boredom. She spent her afternoons in cinemas sitting through the programme two or three times until the seats around her filled up. She bought a record

player and remained in her flat until the jaunty music of the Mozart horn concertos, which she had always loved, drove her out in search of company. At a poetry reading she met Harry Troy, young, predatory, and entirely selfish. For a year they had been lovers. But Harry was gluttoned on all she had to offer. He was no longer courteous; he still used her, but with the insolence that spoke of contempt. Cynthia recognized the signs. Harry was ready to move on; the affair was over.

The tea reminded Draper of his first experiences with a paint box. Its colour lay somewhere between chrome yellow and burnt umber, with strange submarine tints of blue. He fished for the sugar, and noticed that half-submerged, the spoon was still clearly visible. 'One day I'm going to bottle some of this,' he told Troy. 'I shall take it to the public analyst and open a book on what he finds. How about laying the first bet?'

Troy took a sip and shook his head. 'I only bet on sure things,' he grinned.

The café was crowded, a sure sign that there was a heavy list over at the court. Half a dozen Sikh peddlars sat at one table, two of them with their faces striped with sticking plaster. Draper sighed deeply. An assault charge at the very least, he thought. He rather liked the Sikhs, with their black oiled hair tucked beneath their turbans. But their week-end parties were murder. They drank rum by the bottle, and after the second pint, remembered they were warriors. Brewer's favourite story was about how one of them had chased him down the street waving a three-foot sword. Privately Draper thought him a liar. The Sikhs only seemed to carve up their own relations.

By the counter, beneath the tea urn, a boy in a tight Italian-style suit sat between a man and a woman, probably his parents. The woman was crying. The man, cloth cap squarely on his head, studied his hands. 'You just got to tell the truth,' he said. 'That's what the copper told me last night. Tell the truth and it won't be so bad.' He fiddled with a bottle of tomato ketchup, and clumsily knocked it over. The boy sprang back, overturning his chair. 'Mind me suit,' he said. It was a nice suit, thought Draper, a four-button jacket, turned-back cuffs,

and drain-pipe trousers; the style and the cut that was perfectly certain to send any magistrate in search of his stiffest sentence.

'What are you on?' he asked Troy. 'I'm supposed to be doing court with Brewer.'

Carefully tracing his name in spilt tea, Troy took time to answer. 'I'm on call,' he said finally. 'There's a missing child story, and the meat porters are holding a protest meeting.'

'What about?'

Troy shook his head. 'God only knows. What do meat porters protest about? Tally money or something. Whatever it is it's going to be bloody wet down there.'

The Sikhs got up to go. Rank blue smoke swirled round their turbans. They all spoke at once, their voices harsh and emphatic. Always, thought Draper, they sounded as if they were quarrelling. Were they any less fierce when they made love?

'It's time,' said Troy. 'We ought to be getting back.'

Brewer was already in court, and Fenning sat at his desk, the telephone clamped to his ear. 'The kid's been fished out of the canal,' he said. 'Go down to the house and see if you can snatch a picture.'

'Me?' said Troy.

'You,' said Fenning. 'Who do you think I meant? Charley's Aunt?' He returned to the telephone. 'I'm sending a man right now. The mother's down at the canal is she. Who's at home? A neighbour? No one else there, no opposition.' He waved angrily at Troy. 'Get moving. You've got a clear run.'

Impassively, Doreen wielded her lipstick. It was a new shade, a raw, transparent orange that made her mouth look as though she had been careless with an iced lolly. The blonde streak in her hair was brighter. Clearly she judged the experiment a success.

'Nothing to do but watch the local talent?' inquired Fenning. 'You can start by making up the sets.'

'But Doreen . . . ' protested Draper.

'Doreen's busy.'

'It's not my job.'

'Listen,' said Fenning. 'Until you think yourself sufficiently trained to go out into the cold, cold world any bloody job's

your job. There'll be some copy to phone through later. And you can do the court this afternoon ' He waited for Draper to protest again. 'O.K.' now? Right, get on with it.'

Dear mother, thought Draper, they only hang the really bad murderers now. If I killed him, I think I could get away with it. No one could possibly give a good reason for wanting him alive. It would be like killing a pig. They'd call me the humane killer.

'And use the old carbons,' said Fenning 'No one's writing a masterpiece in this office'

Sullenly, Draper set to work Three pages, two carbons for Islington Four pages, three carbons for Holloway Each district had a set number of local papers which were serviced by Fenning's Features Each evening they were posted the day's reports. It was routine to make up the sets in advance. But it was not reporter's work

Fenning went upstairs to the lavatory 'What are you doing that's so important?' Draper asked Doreen.

She did not bother to look up from her magazine 'Waiting for Mr Fenning,' she said 'He wants me to do some letters'

'Why can't you help with these until he's ready?'

Doreen flicked over a page with a moistened finger. 'He didn't ask me to'

'I'm asking you.'

'I'd get my hands dirty. I can't type with dirty hands'

'There's soap and water in the other room,' said Draper, 'you turn the tap and it comes out like magic'

'Cold water,' said Doreen

Resentment flared in Draper's stomach like a sudden attack of indigestion. 'It wouldn't hurt you, just for once,' he said bitterly. Above them the cistern flushed and Fenning lumbered down the stairs.

Doreen folded her magazine and slipped it neatly in her bucket bag. 'Any time you're ready, Mr Fenning,' she said.

Brewer rinsed his mouth with best bitter and nudged the elbow of the CID sergeant. 'Did you hear the one about the little Yid who came home crying,' he said. 'Told his mother

that the kids at school said he had an Oedipus complex. Made him feel pretty bad, and he felt like running away. Momma picked him up and kissed him all over. "Don't worry my son," she said. 'what does it matter what any of them say, so long as you love your mother' ". He drank some more bitter. 'Not bad, eh?'

The sergeant nodded shortly, and unobtrusively moved back a pace. When Brewer told a story he told it at close quarters, spraying his audience with bad breath and particles of cheese roll. A scrap of cheddar floated in the sergeant's whisky and he picked it out with the tip of a pencil.

'Sorry,' said Brewer. 'Have another. On me.'

Troy and Draper sat side by side round the bend of the bar. The lunch hour was nearly over and Draper was trying to make his second pint spin out until he had to go.

'Did you get the picture?' he asked.

Troy nodded. 'There was only an old girl there. I told her the kid's mother said it would be O.K. She was a bit dodgy at first but I managed to persuade her.'

'How old was she? The kid I mean.'

'Five,' said Troy. 'Pretty little thing with curly hair. It was a good picture. They all ought to use it.'

'Nice bonus for you.'

Troy looked sceptical. 'I'll be lucky. Fenning owes me for the last one.'

'You'll get it all right,' said Draper. 'He always pays up in the end. That's the funny thing about Fenning: he sweats your guts out, but he always shares the loot. He swilled the dregs of the beer around his glass. 'Guilty conscience perhaps.'

'Guilty conscience?' repeated Troy petulantly. 'What the hell are you so snugg about? We're all in the dirt together you know. It doesn't matter whether you dig it up or spread it around. You smell just the same.' His face flushed and he had raised his voice. The barmaid paused in polishing a glass and looked curiously in their direction.

'Harry,' said Draper, 'I didn't mean'

'I know what you meant,' said Troy. 'You don't like the idea of snatching pictures, especially pictures of dead kids. I got the

point the first time. But that's what they pay us for.' He swallowed the last of his beer and nodded towards Brewer. 'Ask him, he's an old hand. That's the job we do. That's where the money comes from.'

It was too glib, thought Draper. Troy talked about money, but his reasons for staying with Fenning's Features went deeper than that. In some simple and misconceived way he was trying to prove himself as tough as the job demanded. He sneered at Fenning and Brewer, but he felt the need to be accepted by them on their own terms. If they were insensitive, he could be equally callous. You smell just the same, Troy had said. But there was a difference, so obvious that he could pass it by, in the way that a child brought up in Pisa could ignore the Leaning Tower.

Troy had money and Draper had none. Motives and verdicts were based on two entirely different sets of values. Money had its own smell, Draper knew that. It was as personal as a body odour, as natural as sweat. He had never detected it on himself.

It was late afternoon and the court was like a dark, varnished cave. Draper's notebook was half full; rail frauds, a late charge brought in during the lunch hour, a summons for dangerous driving. For the past half-hour, the magistrate had been plodding through an involved cross-summons for assault. Draper decided to let it go.

'Week after week she's been bringing home men,' he heard the witness say as he slipped through the jailer's door. A case like that could go on for hours.

He crossed the entrance hall, his heels clicking on the tiled floor. Outside the probation officer's room, a woman waved at him, her white glove flickering like a flag. She was middle-aged and small inside a heavy fur coat. 'Young man,' she said, 'are you going to report my case?'

Draper looked at her more closely. 'You were one of the defendants this afternoon?'

'I pleaded not guilty,' said the woman firmly. 'They said I didn't pay my fare. But I did. It was all a mistake.'

Draper recognized her now. She had been convicted and fined.

The magistrate had torn into her pretty fiercely 'No excuse,' he had said, 'a simple despicable fraud made much worse by the lies you told' Draper tucked his notebook in his pocket 'I shall have to report it,' he said

'It was all a mistake,' repeated the woman 'I don't want it to go in the local paper No one knows Couldn't you . . ?' She let the sentence trail away and opened her handbag

'No,' said Draper 'No I couldn't' He turned away and heard her come after him

'Please,' she said 'It's unimportant to you, and it matters so much to me' She sounded close to tears 'Five pounds,' she said. 'Five pounds if you'll forget it'

Draper pelted down the court steps and into the street The woman followed him, her high heels skidding on the smooth granite, her coat flying open as she ran Draper could hear her voice brokenly calling him back He ignored it, dodging across the road in front of a trolley bus The solid flow of traffic protected him At the office door he looked back and saw the woman on the far kerb She had a handkerchief to her face, and as he watched she slowly turned and walked away Draper fitted his key in the lock and went on in to do his duty

4

It was a beautiful sunset. Small black clouds loitered over a pink sky and crawled in reflection across the bath water. Draper gyrated a toe and ripples lapped against his chest. 'And as the sun slowly sinks we say farewell,' he murmured. For half an hour he had held the bathroom against all comers. Billany had rattled the door knob but Draper had sat tight. If you kept quiet and said nothing everyone went away. It was a first principle that he would include in any handbook on living in digs.

The bath was old and big. Its bottom felt like a gravel pit, its sides were corrugated with tide marks of petrified scum. Over one end the geyser hung like a secret weapon, a small pilot light burning in its intestines. Draper lay back and let the day's troubles soak away.

The bathroom was where he composed his best letters. Dear mother and father, he wrote in soap-suds, you would have been proud of your son today. I behaved like a bastard for the best possible reasons. Father always used to talk about integrity. What would he have done, I wonder.

Draper lowered himself in the water and nibbled moodily at the corner of his flannel. No doubt at all he continued, parents always behave properly. You taught me about honour and duty and love thy neighbour and not to pick my nose. Why did you leave out the bit about how to make a good living?

Suddenly chilled, he lurched upright, splashing water over the bathroom floor. The small clouds were bigger now, the sky was losing its flamingo tinge. Balancing on a frayed cork mat, he dried himself with a hand towel. He was wet through before he was half done. Billany hammered again on the door. 'Are you drowned in there?'

Draper put on the raincoat that served him as a dressing-gown. 'Coming now,' he called, 'hang on just a second.' Hastily

he swirled clean water round the bath. The scum that he had left was indistinguishable among the older deposits.

'It's all yours,' he said, flinging open the door. Billany pushed past him, 'And about time,' he said. 'Did you clean the bath?'

Draper looked hurt. 'Of course I cleaned it,' he said. 'What d'you take me for?'

Towel tucked over his arm, he climbed the stairs to his own room. The bathroom door slammed shut and the bolt rattled into place. Too late he remembered that he had left his cake of soap behind. It was useless going back for it, Billany believed implicitly that finding was keeping.

'There are ash trays in every bedroom,' said Mrs Barrow, 'I would be grateful if some of you gentlemen would remember that.' The gas fire popped and waved beneath the duty mirror, and Billany sucked at his soup.

Dinner was the occasion at which Mrs Barrow always chose to make her announcements. An increase in rent, a hole in the carpet, a telephone message, everything was remarked on between the soup and the coffee. It was like reading a serial story, thought Draper. Mr Barrow had a fine sense of drama, and the best was always kept until last. Once, when he had cut a towel while drying his razor, she had spun out the tension until he was rolling bread pellets in a sweat of anxiety. 'I would be grateful,' she said at last, 'if some of you gentlemen would remember that towels cost money.' Draper felt like a schoolboy called out at morning prayers. He jerked around, scattering his bread pellets on to the floor. A pure accident, Mrs Barrow, he babbled. 'Of course I'll replace it. It was no good Billany telling him not to panic, to remember that Mrs Barrow depended on him and people like him for her living. Guilt reduced him to a state of nerves in which he would say anything to atone for his crime.'

The table was draped with a starched white cloth, so stiff that it bent like a plank instead of folding comfortably over the knees. On either side the boarders sat like opposing armies, peering over a barricade of water jugs, cruets and bottles of sauce. There were pictures on the walls, all of gloomy men

sprouting out of their tall collars like whiskered tulips. The one with the rimless glasses was Mrs Barrow's father; the one with the rat-trap mouth her great uncle. 'It's a good thing they're gone,' she told Draper on the day that he arrived. 'I can't think what they would have said to have seen me reduced to this kind of life.' Suitably intimidated Draper had murmured his sympathy. 'The rent,' said Mrs Barrow, 'is due every Friday. A week in advance.'

A smell of steamed cod crept up from the kitchen and Billany sniffed suspiciously. 'We'll be growing scales next,' he declared. 'Where d'you suppose they get fish on a Monday?' It must be frozen.

'Nothing wrong with a bit of fish,' said Mr Todd, a small tattooed draughtsman. 'Good for the brain.'

'But frozen,' said Billany earnestly. 'It takes away all the flavour. It's got no energy.'

'Try some of these pills,' said Mr Todd. 'They'll give you the kind of energy you want.'

Billany stroked his beard. 'Are they what you use?' An old man like yourself. He wagged his head towards the door. 'You ought to slip a couple in the old girl's cocoa. We might get a bit of fun around here.'

Draper edged his chair a little closer to the fire. The talk in Mrs Barrow's dining room had the monotony of a box of spelling bricks. It was rearranged sometimes it formed new, if unambitious, patterns. But it never built up into anything. The pyramid was always nudged over by an old and stale joke. He had wondered about Mrs Barrow's sex life himself, but it was rather like trying to deduce the mating habits of a dinosaur from the massive remains in a tar pit. He had given up trying.

For Billany it remained an ever interesting topic. One evening he had spent a full hour trying to imagine the ritual of her undressing. 'There must be iron girders holding her in,' he said dreamily. 'What d'you think happens when the nuts and bolts come out?'

'Distribution of largesse,' suggested Draper.

Billany had liked that. 'And what about the stresses and strains?' he exploded. 'I ought to work out a mathematical cal-

culatation.' He had thrown himself back in his chair, loosening the joints with energetic laughter.

The fish was covered in sauce, the colour of a boiled blanket. Draper tackled it warily. It was like opening a parcel that he knew to be booby-trapped. Even fillets that he ate seemed to retain their bones. No matter how careful he was, the last mouthful, taken in confidence that the last threat had been removed, always betrayed him. He watched enviously as Billany loaded his fork with cod and potato, and gulped it down.

'Pass the water,' he said.

Mr Todd obliged. 'What's the matter, don't you like fish?'

'It's the bones,' said Draper. 'I always seem to get them.'

Mr Todd nodded wisely. 'Some people have delicate throats,' he said. 'I knew a chap in the army who choked on a kipper bone. He fell off his bench all blue in the face. We slapped him on the back and all the rest of it, but it wasn't any good. He pegged out before we got him to the MO.'

Draper pushed his plate away, feeling slightly sick.

'Hand it over,' said Billany. 'If you're sure you don't want it.' He piled Draper's helping on top of his own. 'You ought to go to Dublin,' he said. 'Finest prawns in the world. Oysters too. All guts and go, not a scrap of bone.' He flicked a scrap of fish from his beard. 'Did he suffer much, the chap with the kipper?' he inquired.

The lounge at Mrs Barrow's had all the amenities of a NAAFI canteen, and approximately the same degree of comfort. The designs of the odd carpets covering the floor merged into a neutral drabness, with various bleached oases marking where past boarders had spilled their drinks. The cloth of the billiard table was welted by an inexpertly mended tear, and in the gloom of the corner furthest away from the fire, an upright piano stood like an abandoned coffin. There was a smell of billiard chalk and metal polish. More family portraits hung at intervals around the walls, and in the huge grate a small heap of coals oozed yellow smoke.

Mrs Barrow lit the fire each day at five o'clock precisely and the evening's supply of coal filled exactly half of the ornate scuttle. The ration had to last and keeping the fire alight until

the last boarder had gone to bed was a calculated art. Half an hour's cheerful blaze at the start of the evening meant two hours' chill at its end. Mrs Barrow kept her coal in a locked cellar and the key in her pocket.

The coal supply united the boarders in a chilly camaraderie; but the television set divided them. Draper had tried to stay out of it. He rarely watched the programmes, and since his school-days the idea of taking sides of committing himself to a cause or an alliance, whether it was in a play ground fight or in a boarding house dispute, filled him with apprehension.

His evasions were useless and as he pushed open the lounge door, threads of his one mouthful of food itching between his teeth, he knew that it was going to be one of the evenings he dreaded.

'Do you expect us all to watch programmes for bloody morons?' asked Mr Evans, a quantity surveyor with a large black moustache and a navy blue chin. 'Do you think that night after night some of us here, some of us, that is, with the rudiments of intelligence, want to watch all that cock about gangsters? There's other things in life you know. There's even things which might improve your mind if you're prepared to take the risk.' Mr Evans attended evening classes and the previous summer he had gone to Yugoslavia on a W.T.A. tour. Draper rather liked him, but Mr Evans came from Birmingham, and in any argument he looked to Draper - a fellow provincial - for support.

He looked now. 'Isn't it right what I say? Quiz games, panel games, all that cock. Aren't you fed up with it?'

Well, Draper temporized. 'I don't often watch television.'

Leave the lad out of it, said Mr Beadle, ramming tobacco into the bowl of his pipe.

'Everyone who lives here is concerned.'

'No one but you is concerned.'

Mr Beadle was retired, rich, and invulnerable. His wife had died many years ago and since then he had weathered the hospitality of three married daughters before deciding that he preferred to live in the company of men where he could pay his way and be as obstinate as he felt inclined. Strangers expected

old men to be stubborn, and made the proper allowances. Members of the same family conceded nothing. After the three girls, each one of them as rude and ruthless as himself, Mr Evans was easy meat.

'In all this house, there's only you who talks about improving the mind,' said Mr Beadle. 'Could be you're the only one who needs that sort of thing. I'm all right. Young Draper looks all right. Mr. Billany seems perfectly content with his *status quo*. We're all sympathetic of course, but we can't let your education interfere with other people's entertainment. It's not fair.'

Below Mr Evans' left elbow, the secret agent shot the lock off a bedroom door. The man in bed reached for his automatic beneath his pillow but too late. 'You call this entertainment?' demanded Mr Evans. 'There's a film about penguins on the other programme.'

Mr Beadle took his pipe from his mouth. 'Is there really?' he said. 'Penguins?' He looked round the room. 'I find up those of you who want penguins.'

Draper dug both hands in his pockets. 'You can't take a vote like that. It's not the way to do it.'

Mr Beadle raised his eyebrows. 'Is there some other way? A secret ballot maybe?' 'Do you think people are too shy to admit they want to watch penguins?' He underlined the last word with heavy irony, and both Draper and Mr Evans felt their faces turn red.

'There's nothing wrong with penguins,' said Mr Evans.

'Nothing at all,' said Mr Beadle.

'Some people like to watch them.'

'So I understand.'

'Every night you come in here and switch that bloody thing on to exactly what you want,' said Mr Evans. 'No one else gets a look in.'

Mr Beadle watched a smoke ring eddying its way up to the ceiling. 'No one else complains,' he said. 'It seems that my taste in programmes meets with the approval of most of the residents in this establishment.'

Mr Evans slapped his evening paper on to the mantelpiece as

if he wished it were Mr Beadle's bald head 'Don't be so bloody pompous,' he snapped His accent thickened as his annoyance increased In contrast, Mr Beadle grew blander, spinning out his speeches like thick, golden syrup

'Pompous,' he said, giving the fat, quizzical chuckle that signalled the end of the argument 'I have always considered myself a reasonable man By all means watch your penguins'

'The programme's over,' said Mr Todd 'two minutes ago'

There was a moment of silence, punctuated by the steady plopping of Mr Beadle's pipe 'A pity,' he said at last, 'a great pity You might say that the birds had flown'

Mr Evans showed his teeth in a savage grin 'Penguins can't fly,' he snapped 'It's something you learn at school, part of your education'

It was not worth much thought Draper Mr Beadle hardly flinched But the shot had been fired, and he understood why In a long war it was often the smallest bullet that killed the general

'I've got to get out,' he told Troy 'If I spend another night listening to those old sods going on about the telly I shall do my nut They're both as bad as each other Evans and his culture for the masses, and Beadle sitting there like an Islington rajah gloating over a lot of titbits They'll drive me round the bend'

'You could always go home,' Troy suggested

'I could always cut my throat'

What you want, said Troy, 'is someone to peg out and leave you a few thousand quid That ought to set you up nicely'

Draper gave a hollow laugh 'I don't even know anyone with a thousand quid If I saved a millionaire from drowning he'd go bankrupt the next day I can see my future like a big black sack It's bloody uncomfortable and is stitched up tight I can't get out and no one can get in It's a cheerful prospect'

'There's always Mr Fenning'

Carefully Draper set his cup in its saucer. 'I have nightmares about Fenning,' he said 'This job's the only one I've got, and

Fenning happens to be the man who employs me. It's a beautiful relationship, something like master and slave. He doesn't beat me too often and I manage to stay alive on the crumbs from his table. But it's as sure as old boots that he's not going to give me a bigger slice of the loaf. I might get strong enough to beat his head in.'

'You're due for a rise.'

Draper shook his head. 'Not a chance. Not unless I shot the magistrate and gave Fenning the exclusive story. I can't afford just to walk out, I've got nothing saved and he knows it. I've just got to hang on until something else turns up. We're not all in the grocery business.'

'I'm not in the grocery business,' protested Troy.

'Your old man is. It's the same thing.'

Troy pushed back his chair and stood up. 'It's glandular,' he said. 'Once a week you come in with the same old moan. Lousy digs. Not enough money. Fenning's a bastard. The job stinks. It's all true, or you think it's true. But down at rock bottom there's something else.'

'You've got a one-track mind.'

'So you say,' retorted Troy. 'All the same, I'm right. You're sex-starved. All that frustration does terrible things to your system. Your heart beats twice as fast, you bite your nails, you look a wreck. It's simple chemistry, something to do with adrenalin.' He tweaked Draper's tie into place. 'Look it up for yourself. Be your own doctor.'

'You know what you can do,' said Draper.

'Physically impossible,' said Troy. 'That's in the book too.'

It was a quiet morning. Doreen scoured her nails with an orange stick. Fenning telephoned to say he would be in the office after lunch, and Draper wrote his letter home.

'There is really very little news,' he began. 'We have all been working pretty hard, and I am now covering one of the courts. My shorthand (Dad will want to know) is getting better. Harry Troy, the friend I mentioned before, took me along to a poetry reading the other night. It was very lively.' Draper paused, erased the last sentence, and typed heavily over the fluffy paper. 'I found it very interesting. There was a stimulating discussion

to wind things up. Harry (Troy, that is) introduced me to his fiancée. She is a very understanding person. Her father, I believe, is a vicar somewhere in Sussex.'

As he finished the sentence, the telephone at his elbow rang, trapping him in the lie. Draper picked it up, and incredulously, heard Cynthia's voice asking if Troy was in the office.

'He's not here,' he said, 'this is John Draper. I was just writing about you.'

'About me?'

'To my parents,' said Draper. 'I was just telling them how much I liked you.'

He heard her laugh softly. She sounded pleased, he thought. 'Harry's on a job,' he said, 'can I give him a message?'

'He was going to let me know if he was coming to dinner tonight,' Cynthia said. 'He wasn't sure whether he could make it.'

'I'll ask him.'

'He might not know yet.'

'I'll get him to ring you.'

'That would be fine.'

The conversation flagged.

'Well,' Draper said awkwardly, 'I'll make sure he rings.'

'Not later than six.'

'Not later than six,' he repeated.

'You must come yourself sometime,' said Cynthia. 'I'm always glad to see Harry's friends.'

Draper transferred the receiver to his other ear. 'I'd like that,' he said. 'I'd like to come very much. You took good care of me the other night. I've not had the chance to thank you.' His grip on the telephone was growing sweaty. He changed hands again, and groped for his handkerchief.

'Are you still there?'

'Still here,' he said hastily.

'You'll tell Harry then.'

'I will,' he promised. 'The minute he comes in.'

Cynthia hesitated, and he imagined her looking at her watch, trying to decide how to end the conversation.

'I'd better ring off,' he said, 'there's a lot to do' Doreen gave a small disparaging grunt, and he glared at her across the office. 'I've written it all down. Harry's to ring not later than six. Anything else?'

'Nothing else See you soon, I hope'

'I hope so' said Draper, 'I really do'

He replaced the receiver as if it were something fragile, and rubbed his hands on his handkerchief 'Do you always listen to other people's conversations' he demanded

Doreen ignored the question Good job Mr Fenning wasn't in You know what he says about personal calls'

It wasn't my call' said Draper 'I just happened to know the caller' Fascinated he watched Doreen prod loose a strip of cuticle and then bite it off 'Must you do that?' he asked 'Can't you save it for another time?'

Deliberately Doreen started on the next nail She gave no sign of having heard him It was rather eerie, thought Draper, as if by the flick of a switch she could convert her mind into a one way radio, transmitting the signals but receiving none 'Your nails, dear, he said loudly Go and eat them somewhere else'

Doreen stared at him impassively through mascara clogged lashes Must have been a very special caller, she said You were using your other voice'

'What other voice?'

'You know which I mean,' said Doreen softly and spitefully, 'the posh one'

5

The candle flame shuddered in the draughts as Troy peered at his wrist watch. It was almost eleven o'clock and he was three hours late. Grease spots fell like tears on to the sleeve of his jacket, and sulkily he scratched them loose. Cynthia would notice, he thought. Cynthia always noticed. She was too observant, too ready to tell him how to behave. He shrugged his shoulders and drank some more of the beer he no longer wanted. He had to go soon, there was no sense in putting it off.

He stroked the arm of the girl beside him. She was small and blonde, eighteen years old. 'Got to move soon.'

'Already?' 'Stay for the next lot.'

One group moved off the stand and another took its place. They wore tight blue jeans and check shirts. The leader had a small black beard and his hair was combed down in a fringe. His guitar was plugged in to a loudspeaker, and he sang as if he had a cold in his head. The club was in a cellar that the bands used as a rehearsal room. The walls were painted blue and the ceiling blood red. Tables and chairs were jammed against the band stand, there was little room to dance. Instead, the regulars performed a hand jive, a ritual that turned people into happy puppets. It was simple and satisfying: knee tap, scissor movement, elbow tap, hello sign.

Troy blew his nose loudly. The air was thick with smoke, and his throat was sore. He glanced at his wrist watch again. Eleven o'clock, there was no mistake. Why, he wondered, did he make trouble for himself? Draper had given him the message to ring Cynthia, and hours ago it would have been easy to say that he could not meet her for dinner. She would have understood all right. She always understood even when she did not believe him. She would excuse every lie, every evasion if he allowed her to excuse them graciously. Tact was one of her strongest

points. She made allowances; she did not create scenes. She was, and he noted the fact with a mental swagger, the perfect mistress.

The pony-tail of the blonde girl wagged in time to the music, and Troy reached for her hand. She smiled brightly and mechanically, but went on with her hand jive. They made contact, thought Troy, like two ball bearings; click, and then away. At the proper time, she demanded attention, but she was independent of him. She did not expect courtesy; she was friendly, but in the last resort, indifferent. With Cynthia thought Troy, everything mattered. There were degrees of importance, just as there were degrees of offence. For someone that he had taken to be sophisticated (and that was another word he had trouble in digesting) she was extraordinarily vulnerable. Her feelings could be hurt. Probably, Troy told himself, it was something to do with her age.

He smiled across at the blonde girl. She was eighteen years old and Cynthia was almost twenty years older. Momentarily, he was appalled. What, he wondered, would the blonde think if he told her that he was sleeping with a woman old enough to be her mother. Check. Old enough to be his own mother.

He nursed his beer, tilting the glass, so that a little slopped over on to the table-top. The music had changed but it sounded much the same. Indistinctly, the blonde went on with her hand jive. Cynthia would probably be asleep, he thought, and unsummoned, a picture of her bedroom invaded his memory. The window would be partly open, the curtains waving in the breeze. The travelling clock would be ticking quietly by the bed. Her face would be slightly greasy with cream.

He stood up quickly and drained his glass. 'I've got to go,' he said. 'Are you coming?'

'It's still early.'

'I've got to go,' he repeated.

She smiled, no less brightly than before. 'See you then.'

'See you,' said Troy. 'Be good.'

The streets were wet, but it was no longer raining. Troy turned up his coat collar, and felt in his pocket for change. If he telephoned now, he might not be too late. He saw couples

walking arm in arm, and in the corner shadow, a woman stepped forward swinging a key ring.

Troy hurried past, and he heard the click of the key chain as it wound round her finger. A taxi roared by, and Troy ran after it for a few paces, then stopped. Far better to telephone first. Cynthia hated anyone arriving unannounced.

There was a man in the phone booth, and Troy stood outside, rehearsing what he had to say. 'Darling,' he said tentatively. But was that right? There was no retreating from a declaration of love, and if the endearment did not disarm, he was on dangerous ground. 'Fenning kept me late,' he said. But that was no better. Cynthia knew his working hours. And if he had been delayed at the office, why was it that he had not phoned?

If Draper had not delivered the message, of course, he would be in the clear. A thin rain began to fall and Troy glared into the booth. Innocence, he thought, know nothing. If Draper backed him up (and there was no reason why Draper should not back him up), Cynthia would believe him. No message. No telephone call. He took a penny from his pocket and rapped on the glass. 'My wife's ill,' he said distinctly, 'I've got to call her mother.'

The man inside glanced round, startled. How furtive he looked, thought Troy. Perhaps he was making excuses too. 'All right,' he said, 'in a second.' Troy held the door open. It's urgent.

The man gabbled his good-bye and stepped out. 'There you are,' he said. 'It's all yours.' The receiver was wet, beaded with condensation and the coin box was stiff. Troy heard his pennies clash down, like doors slamming in a vault, and then the ringing of the number. 'Hello,' he said, 'it's me.'

She did not answer immediately, and he scowled at his reflection in the mirror facing him. Water swished distantly, and he understood. Cynthia was in the bath. It was a stroke of luck; warmth relaxed her like a lizard. Half-submerged, and drugged by the scent of bath essence, she was at her most agreeable. 'Darling,' he said, 'I'm sorry I'm late.'

The water gurgled, and he knew she was sitting up. It was a

bad sign: she was alert, and no half-excuses would do. 'All right,' said Cynthia, 'what happened?'

'What d'you mean, what happened?'

'Why didn't you ring?'

'Was I meant to?'

She sighed impatiently. 'I left a message for you to ring. You were supposed to be coming to dinner.'

'I got no message.'

'Harry,' she said, warningly.

'Honestly,' he said, 'no one told me anything about dinner. Who did you speak to?'

He could sense her testing his lie. It was not important whether she believed it. All that mattered was whether she could allow herself to accept it. He felt his pulse jumping as if he was waiting for a card to be turned, or a number to come up. 'I've been working,' he said. 'There was a fight down in Leman Street. A copper got beaten up. I've been wandering round trying to find something out.'

'And did you?'

'Not a thing,' said Troy. 'I've told you what it's like down there. Nobody talks. It was a dead loss.'

'You didn't see John Draper?'

This is it, thought Troy. This was where he could be caught out. 'I spoke to him,' he said, 'earlier on.'

'He didn't tell you I telephoned?'

'We were in a hurry. You know how it is.'

'All right then,' said Cynthia, 'forget it.'

The seconds ticked by. Troy glanced at his watch. Five minutes to complete the smoothing-down, five minutes to get her to bed. 'I'm coming round,' he said. 'Stay right where you are. I'll scrub your back.'

It was always the same after he had gone. The flat seemed bigger and colder; drained of noise and life. The bed was savaged, like the scene of a crime. One pillow still bore the dent of his head. In the bathroom, the basin was rimmed with the scum from his razor. The morning papers were folded inside out.

Slowly, Cynthia rolled on her stockings. Her legs were long and white, pumice stone kept the skin smooth but in the hollow of the ankles, fine purple veins straggled like the markings on a bird's egg. It was odd that she should remember that, she thought. It was twenty, no twenty five years since she had been bird's nesting. It had been late spring almost summer. The red beds were thick and as she had reached out to touch the tiny domed nest water had gushed up over her shoes.

Abently, she stroked her foot. Her childhood seemed incredibly remote cut off from her like the green and settled country of a nursery tale. In her book case she still kept the stories of Beatrix Potter. Peter Rabbit stealing Mr McGregor's carrots and Mrs Tittlemouse neat in her larder full of thistle down. It was all so settled so secure the water colours painted with love, the pages grimed with small fingerprints. She never looked at them now. It was too painful. Each book was a passport which for her was no longer valid.

It was raining again and she got up to close the window. Lights burned in office buildings. A fly over the garage, several streets away hung limply on its pole. She felt a twinge of pain in her right shoulder, and shrugging back her dressing gown, saw the neat purple bruise made by Troy's teeth.

She had been in the bath when he arrived and had not heard him open the door and step into the room. He kissed her gently at first and then as she responded with a hard expert force that drew her out of the water his right hand slid round her back, his left hand squeezed her breasts pinching the nipples. She pulled his head down as his tongue filled her mouth. Then suddenly his face slid to one side and he bit her with quick surgical precision. She cried out and he stepped back, grinning hatefully. He had braided her she thought not in love, but simply to prove that he was still his creature.

She dressed rapidly and made the bed. Angrily she stripped the pillow that he had used and put on a fresh pillow case. She emptied the ash tray (Harry always smoked a cigarette after making love) and washed up the breakfast things.

Guy Afton's face stared up at her from the newspaper. The headline said **TV SAGI DINIES ANY NEW ROMANCE**. She sat

down heavily, and read the story. Guy had been a guest at a house party; there was a daughter; there were photographs of them both, hand in hand. It was a stunt, she was sure of it. For as long as she had known Guy he had proceeded by numbers. Their separation was stage one, and while there was no chance of a reconciliation, he would make no move before passing through the second stage of the ritual: a divorce.

She smoothed the paper, and the bland face cracked beneath her hand. Behind her the flat, with its striped wallpaper, loomed like a well-furnished cell. The books waited on their shelves. The records stood, free from dust, in their bright sleeves. Guy was not what she wanted. She had chosen to be alone, and Harry helped her to pass the time, without being in any way permanent. She saw her hand begin to tremble slightly, and she clenched it into a fist. After a while, the trembling began again, and this time she could not stop it.

PART TWO

The tide marks had passed the centre of the ceiling. Damp stains rippled across the distemper like a long mountain range, and squinting with the effort, Draper drew a Union Jack on the highest peak. From the desk top he could see into the garden of Romani's café. Weeds fondled a pile of egg crates. Rusty tins overflowed from a sodden cardboard box. A large black cat threaded its way through a maze of baling wire, and a fine drizzle pimpled the dustbins.

Draper shifted his weight from one foot to the other. There was a hole in his right shoe, and through it he could feel the sharp outline of a paper clip. It was still only Wednesday. Two days to go until pay day. Repairs were urgently needed, but so were funds. Perhaps Fenning would give him a sub. It depended on how he was feeling. Just lately he had taken to delivering little homilies on matching expenditure with income. Usually though, he came through.

Draper leaned forward and tapped the window. The cat looked up from a salmon tin, and stared at him with blank yellow eyes. 'Lucky sod,' said Draper, not really meaning it. And yet, he thought, it *was* lucky. Money, or the lack of it, made no difference to the way it lived. Life was one long scrounge. There was no status to worry about, no conscience to calm. Furthermore, no one could ever accuse a cat of wasting its time, of having no ambition. He watched it lap round the tin, slitting its eyes as the flavour soaked into its tongue. It was absorbed in what it was doing. Its satisfaction was complete.

The door opened and Fenning looked into the room. He shook his head slowly, and Draper jumped down from the desk. His hands felt huge with embarrassment. 'It was the damp,' he said.

'The damp?'

'On the ceiling,' said Draper.

Deliberately, Fenning walked to the centre of the room. He set his hands on his hips, and looking upwards, turned his head from left to right. Every action was performed in slow motion. It was like a Health and Beauty demonstration, thought Draper; a ritual in strict tempo. He improvised a chant to fit the movements: '*Left*, two three. *Right*, two three. *Stretch* your neck. *Scratch* your arse.' In the garden, the cat abandoned the salmon tin and elouched away towards the kitchen.

'I was just seeing how far the damp had spread,' said Draper.

'You need to stand on the furniture?'

'I was measuring it. Exactly.'

'You know how much I paid for that desk?'

I don't give a monkey's, thought Draper. 'No,' he said.

'Fifteen quid,' said Fenning. 'Second-hand. In good condition though. Look at the surface now. Scratched to buggery. Not that you care.'

Draper tried to wrench the conversation back to its starting point. 'The damp's getting worse,' he said 'It can't be very healthy down here. What if we had an inspector . . . ?'

'We've had inspectors.'

'Not lately,' said Draper. He brushed his hand over the desk top. 'I'll put a drop of polish on there. Some of that silicone stuff. That'll put it right.'

Fenning blew his nose loudly. It was a signal to change the subject 'Anyway,' he said, 'there's a job for you.'

'I was doing the court.'

'Forget the court. There's been a break-in at Swan's. Two thousand quid nicked. Go and see what you can pick up.'

Draper hesitated for a moment. 'I was going to ask you for a sub . . .'

'What d'you do with your bloody money: eat it?' A crocodile wallet gaped briefly, as Fenning plucked a pound note from the back pocket. 'Now, move,' he said, 'you've not got all day.' He shot back his cuff and glanced at his watch. It was gold, with a sweep second hand, a miniature alarm, and an automatic calendar. One more instrument, thought Draper, and it could pass for a dash-board.

'It's nearly ten now,' said Fenning 'Fifteen minutes to get over there Half an hour to look around You should be able to put something over by eleven Let's have some good quotes.'

'What about dropsy?'

'Who for?'

'I don't know,' said Draper 'The watchman The CID Half a bar always helps'

Fenning shook his head 'Look laddie, you're a reporter, not a bloody benevolent society You just ask questions You don't pay their wages' He tapped the watch again 'Don't forget,' he said 'Bags of quotes And get the names right'

Half a mile from Swan's he could smell the timber, a mixture of spice and turpentine that always reminded him of the balm he inhaled as a child when he had catarrh They made furniture at Swan's three-piece suites dining room suites, cocktail cabinets which played the Bluebells of Scotland when they were opened up and small occasional tables Sometimes Draper wondered what made an occasion The tables were made of deal, with a highly polished maple veneer which blistered off like a dead skin He told old Swan about it once, expecting excuses and official explanations But instead the old man had agreed with him It's trash he said shoddy rotten trash But it's what the public want Smirretted, he still had his own work hop at the back of the factory where he kept his chisels and his blocks of wood Once, Draper had watched him carve the arm of a chair, the shavings rolling back from the steel like long blond watch springs

He had asked what the timber was and old Swan had said it was lime There's nothing to touch it he had said I like a bit of mahogany And oaks all right Not English oak, that's too hard But you can't go wrong with lime It's like cutting cream'

There was no point in asking old Swan about the break-in, thought Draper He kept as far away from the business as he could The finances of the firm were in the moist hand of his son Bernard and there would be no difficulty in persuading Bernard to talk Bernard Swan enjoyed talking

'It's a scandal,' he told Draper. 'I follow police advice, and I get robbed. Just wait until the next meeting of the Chamber of Commerce. I'll see that there's an investigation.'

He paused for breath, and Draper took his chance. 'Into what?'

Bernard Swan offered him a cigarette from a chrome case. There was a fitted lighter in one corner and the cigarette tasted of petrol. Bernard Swan inhaled a mouthful of smoke and blew it out noisily. 'It's confidential,' he said. 'Comes under the old security regs. Have to be careful.'

Draper felt like a conspirator. 'I'm always careful.'

'They won't like it down at the station.'

'That's my worry.' Draper locked his jaw at the appropriate angle, a trifle rakish, youthfully determined. 'It sounds as though you have a genuine grievance,' he said carefully.

Bernard Swan gripped his arm, and leaned forward so that Draper could see the enlarged pores on the side of his nose. 'It was their idea,' he said. 'They told me to stagger the pay day. For years we've paid out on Fridays. Never any trouble. But they advised me to make a change.'

'Who advised you?'

Bernard Swan released his arm. 'I'm just telling you. Down at the station. That CID sergeant.'

'Fuller?'

'I don't know his name. Yes, Fuller. Make a change,' he said. 'You never know who's watching the factory. If you always follow the same routine, it makes it dead easy for thieves.'

'He's got a point,' said Draper.

'That's what I thought,' said Bernard Swan. 'Anyway, last week we paid out on Wednesday. Nobody liked it much, but we thought we'd give it another try. Locked the cash away last night and found it gone this morning.'

'And what about the police?'

Bernard Swan thumped his blotter. 'What about the police? You tell me, Mr Draper. We change the system of a lifetime on their advice, and they can't be bothered to keep an eye on things.' He straightened his tie, and cleared his throat.

Announcement coming up thought Draper 'I am bound to say,' said Bernard Swan, 'that I hold the police entirely responsible for the loss of my firm's money'

'Can I quote you?'

'Certainly,' said Bernard Swan. 'I feel that I am speaking on behalf of my colleagues in the business fraternity all of whom are entitled to police protection. The protection, in fact, which my own company has not received'

'I've got the point,' said Draper.

Bernard Swan still looked severe. 'Perhaps you'd care to see how they got in.'

'Of course,' said Draper.

He followed Bernard Swan on to the factory floor. Sheets of veneer stood against the walls stacked neatly as sliced bread. His feet rustled through crisp shaving, and there was an overpowering smell of glue. It was a shame the stuff was shoddy, he thought. But there was nothing wrong with the materials. The work was still clean.

They paused in front of the gents. A window was forced in here, said Bernard Swan. They knew what they were doing all right. No messing about. They went straight to the safe. Someone called him and he peered across the floor. In the opposite doorway stood a secretary with two men wearing trilby hats and blue overcoat.

Draper recognized them. It's the CID,' he said.

'We'd better pay our respects.'

Neither of the men took off their hats but they both nodded. 'More questions, Sergeant Fuller?' said Bernard Swan. His face was flushed, and he dabbed at his eyes with a handkerchief. 'Three cheers for the Chamber of Commerce,' thought Draper. Behind every business an unsung hero.

The older of the two detectives pointed across the room. 'Perhaps you'd be so good as to show Detective Constable Scruton where the thieves got in, sir,' he said. 'I just want a word with Mr Draper.' He waited until Bernard Swan was out of earshot, and then smiled broadly. 'I suppose that stupid bastard's been making speeches,' he said. 'Not that you'd be so unfriendly as to write them up.' His smile remained genuinely warm, the

identical expression, thought Draper, as the time he broke the drunk's nose on the way to the station.

'That was the idea,' he said. 'What Mr Swan says is news.'

Sergeant Fuller made a farting noise with his lips, but the smile did not alter.

'It's my job to report what he says,' protested Draper. 'It's not my fault that it's a lot of cock.'

Sergeant Fuller clasped Draper around the shoulders, and steered him gently towards the outside door. 'Tell me,' he said, 'do you get all the help you want down at the station?'

'Pretty well,' said Draper

'No difficulties?'

'Not that I can think of.'

'You always get the tip when there's anything on?'

'The office does.'

Sergeant Fuller took his arm from Draper's shoulder, and pushed the door open. 'Then you might say that we enjoy a very friendly relationship,' he said.

'Very friendly,' said Draper.

Sergeant Fuller followed him into the factory yard and closed the door softly. He took a packet of sweets from his overcoat pocket and offered one to Draper. 'Use your loaf,' he said. 'Don't stick your neck out for Swan. It's all balls, anyway. There was no need for anyone to keep special watch on this dump. Swan's get the same service as any other firm. It was just a bit of bad luck that some geezer broke in.'

'But you'd rather I didn't mention this stuff about the police.'

'It might lead to unpleasantness,' said Sergeant Fuller. 'Not trouble. At least, not for me. But every complaint has to be looked into.' He shifted his sweet from one side of his mouth to the other. 'It's all such a bloody waste of time.'

Draper held up his hand. 'All right,' he said, 'for old acquaintance.' He tried to summon up a grin to match the enduring smile of Sergeant Fuller, but it would not come. 'Got to move,' he said, 'they're waiting for me to put something over.'

'It's a nice little story,' said Sergeant Fuller. 'If anything happens I'll give you a tinkle.' He waited until Draper reached

the factory gate and then called after him. 'Remember me to Mr Fenning.' A church clock struck eleven and Draper looked for a phone box. One thing he had learned while working for Fenning's Features was the futility of trying to postpone trouble. He preferred now to meet each small disaster, on time.

It was worse than he had expected. At four o'clock the inquest was still going on. Fenning had given him the full treatment; Brewer, returning from a late lunch, had taken over. A cigarette hung from his bottom lip, and Draper watched the spasmodic snowfall of ash gradually cover his tie as he delivered judgement. 'What beats me,' said Brewer, 'is how any trained journalist – and I use the word loosely – can turn out crap like this.' He held out a sheet of copy paper at arm's length and dropped it into a wastepaper basket. 'That's where that belongs,' he said. 'Now get on with those local stories.'

The drizzle had turned into rain and Draper stared up through the pavement grating at a grey sky. Dear mother and father, he thought, the news is that local boy makes bad. I am fed up and far from home, although home is not where I want to be. Mr Fenning is a swine. Mr Brewer is a sadist. No one is likely to stand on this grating ever again, and the chances are that it will be stew for dinner tonight.

He glanced across at Doreen and rapped hard on his desk. 'Tell me,' he said, 'do you like stew?'

Reluctantly, Doreen lowered her magazine so that the top of the page was level with her nose. 'Stew,' he said, 'I asked whether you liked it.'

'Why?'

'Just curious. Tastes in food are very revealing.'

She shrugged her shoulders, slippery in pink nylon. 'I don't mind it.'

'What about fish?' pursued Draper. 'How do you cope with the bones?'

Doreen pursed her lips. 'I don't think it's any of your business,' she said. 'I don't like people who ask personal questions.'

'What's personal about fish?'

She ignored him and flipped the pages of the magazine. On

the cover a girl rubbed noses with a kitten, and inside a small red sunburst there was an announcement: 'Special Offer, exclusive to readers. Trial flask of sensational new French perfume. Only 2s. 6d.' Doreen would send off for it, thought Draper. She always did.

'I had an idea for a new scent,' he said. 'Absolutely marvelous scheme. Couldn't fail.'

She sighed deeply and stuffed the magazine into her bag. 'What was it called?'

Draper focused his attention on the pale patch of skin above the collar of Doreen's blouse. 'I thought of calling it "Obscene",' he said. She did not reply, but with a deep and piercing pleasure, he saw the target area flush and darken to an unlovely terracotta.

Troy, to his surprise, did not find it funny. 'It's like pulling wings off flies,' he said. 'Imagine that poor cow with her BO and that moustache she probably has to pull out, hair by hair. And you have to add to the misery.'

'She'll get over it.'

'That's not the point.'

'All right,' said Draper, 'tell me what the point is, if you're so clever.'

Troy studied his beer and took a small sip. They were in the public bar, and from behind the partition they could hear Brewer telling a story about the Irishman who was hired to make love to a gorilla. '... He made one last condition,' said Brewer. "'Promise me" he said, "that the children will be brought up as Catholics".'

'The point is,' said Troy, 'that you were just having a go at that stupid oaf and Fenning Doreen just happened to be there.'

'Too bloody true.'

'She can't help the way she is.'

'Not much.'

'Look,' said Troy, 'we're none of us perfect.'

Draper stared at him as if there was egg on his tie. 'Which cracker did you get that little gem from?'

'I forget,' said Troy. He took out his cigarette case and offered it to Draper. There was an inscription inside, to 'H from C', and reading it, Draper smiled broadly.

'What's funny?'

He pointed to the case 'It's like a wash-basin Hot and Cold.' He weighed the case in his hand Silver, he thought. 'From Cynthia?'

Troy nodded 'She's got a thing about inscriptions Everything has to be listed' He snapped the case shut 'I meant to ask you,' he said, 'if she ever asks whether you passed on that message you forgot'

'Who did I forget?'

'Does it matter?' Troy waved at the barmaid 'Just to get me out of it I turned up late and it was a bit tricky I had to say something' He ordered two more beers, and waited

'I like Cynthia,' said Draper

'There's no law against that'

'I bet she thinks I'm a shit'

Troy shook his head 'Not at all I told you she thinks you're sweet' He handed Draper his beer, and raised his own glass. 'Cheers'

'Cheers,' said Draper 'What were you doing to be late?'

'I met someone at the club'

'Nice?'

'Promising'

Draper ran his finger round the rim of the glass, and then licked it 'You're raving mad,' he said 'A marvellous woman like that and you go off chasing odd bits of crumpet You want your head examined'

'You don't know what I want'

True enough, thought Draper but with Troy everything was different Because he had money he had assurance and because he had assurance he could pick and choose He could afford to take risks There was no immediate limit beyond which he dare not proceed If one door closed, there was always another which he could open And even if it did not yield at the first attempt no time was irretrievably lost Time was money, and Troy had money to spare. Suddenly he felt sick,

physically sick, with envy. He said, 'I think you're well away with Cynthia'

Troy drained his glass and glanced at the clock 'I'm due there now,' he said. 'You can come along if you like.'

There was a row of lead soldiers on the book-case. Four were infantrymen, with mutton-chop whiskers, and tight red trews; three were bombardiers, the paint flaking off their shakos; and behind them stood a horse-drawn ambulance loaded with casualties. Cynthia took one of the bodies from a stretcher and put it in Draper's hand. 'Is he dead, or is he wounded?' she asked.

Draper looked closely at the soldier. One leg was in a splint; the torso was bandaged, and years of handling had worn the face into a blank pewter mask. For a moment he hesitated. The question seemed casual enough, but there was something more behind it: it was a kid's question, he thought, and suddenly he saw himself as a small boy, sweating in the dark of the garden shed, chanting the oath that admitted him to the Marlpit gang. Now, as then, the feeling was the same. Secrets were about to be shared, but first came the initiation. Everything depended on giving the right answer to the question.

He closed his eye and took a deep breath. 'Dead,' he said positively, and opened his eyes to see Cynthia smiling.

Trav gave him a slow hard slap. 'Correct,' he said. 'Morbid, but correct.'

'Why morbid?'

'Harry guessed wrong,' said Cynthia. 'Anyone who guesses right is morbid. Gently she laid the soldier back on his stretcher. 'Most people say he's wounded, but some of us know the difference. She squeezed his hand, confirming the alliance, and Draper felt absurdly proud.

'They're nice,' he said. 'Have you had them long?'

'As long as I can remember. I think my father bought them.' She counted silently on her fingers, frowning with concentration. 'It must be over thirty years ago,' she said. 'And they were old then. They're supposed to be Victorian.'

Troy shifted restlessly in his chair. 'I don't see what's so marvellous about them'

'They're antiques,' said Draper. 'Lots of people collect things They're probably valuable'

Cynthia rearranged the soldiers so that their rifles pointed at each other 'I don't think so I only keep them for sentimental value But I'm a hoarder I can't bear to throw things away'

'So we've noticed,' said Troy He heaved himself to his feet and looked out of the window It was still raining and the pavement below was patched with umbrellas Over Knightsbridge the sun bled slowly to death It was almost eight o'clock

They had been at the flat for an hour and a half Troy knew that it had been a mistake to bring Draper To begin with he had been a distraction, someone to entertain Cynthia, to keep her mind off their quarrel There was nothing wrong with the idea Draper was the perfect guest quiet and well behaved, smoking carefully with his cigarette poised a careful inch above the ashtray appreciative even of Cynthia's bloody burgundy But without warning the situation had altered Troy had become the third person in the room He felt excluded, a spectator at a game which he had himself begun

'I'm sorry I forgot to deliver the message,' said Draper

Cynthia settled down beside the gas fire and pulled her skirt over her knees 'It wasn't important

'But you must have waited dinner'

'Not for long' said Cynthia 'I've known Harry for quite a while I'm used to eating alone'

Troy slammed the window shut 'Actually,' he said, 'she enjoys it' He stood behind her and squeezed the lobe of one ear, increasing the pressure until she jerked her head free 'Cynthia's a listener' he said 'She's never really alone with the tireless wireless over there Bags of concerts on the Third Talks on Christ knows what' He picked up the *Radio Times* and ran his finger down the list of pencil marked programmes 'How's this lot for instant culture?' 'The Breadfruit and the Bowling Alley' - a forum on changes in the South American novel, followed by sixty minutes of Bartok, and some bod talking about Jarrow in the thirties.' He perched on the arm of

Draper's chair 'You've no idea what you miss with your nose glued to the telly.'

Draper smiled uneasily 'some people like it.'

'The telly you mean?'

'The radio,' said Draper 'We only have a telly at the digs.'

Troy reached forward to stroke Cynthia's hair and overbalanced slightly as she pulled back 'How does it feel to be part of a minority audience?' he asked 'Does it make you feel exclusive, or just neglected?'

Cynthia walked briskly into the kitchen and Troy followed her. As she turned to face him he closed the door and grabbed her round the waist forcing her body against his. She struggled silently, scoring his hand with her nails jerking to one side as he tried to force his knee between her thighs. His mouth left a wet smear on her cheek, and she spat at him like a cat 'No,' she said 'no, you don't. You can leave me alone. You can get out. Now.' She was trembling violently and when Troy let her go she staggered against the dining board. It was like the moment after a bomb had fallen she thought. The silence roared in her ears. Miles away a car skidded and the squeal of brakes trickled round the small room. She licked her lips and forced herself to breathe more slowly. 'I mean it,' she said 'You can't use me like one of your little tarts. I want you to go.'

He shook his head uncertainly. 'I just got mad. You know me, Can I didn't mean to hurt you.'

'You didn't hurt me.'

'I was just bloody annoyed.'

'All right' she said 'You were annoyed. Now please get out.'

For a second she thought he was going to strike her, but she did not move. He stared at her intently, as if recording every detail of her face filing it away like the photograph of a town that he was unlikely to visit again and even as he stared she knew that he was taking note of each fault, hoarding it for future use. She snapped on the light, and unexpectedly, he grinned 'Good bye, then,' he said, and tapped her hand like an old friend. It was easier than she had expected, but as he walked away, passing Draper who stood crimson-faced by his chair, she had to fight the impulse to call him back. With his

hand on the doorknob he turned and looked once round the room 'Coming?' he said, and Draper put down his glass.

'I suppose I should

She felt the rush of loneliness like a cold wind and in pain she cried out 'No' Draper faltered in mid-stride, his eyes flicking wildly from left to right 'Harry's going,' she said, her voice carefully calm, but I want you to stay'

At half past eight the club was still empty On the stage a man in a leather jacket was testing the microphone, flicking the gauze with his fingernail The sound boomed out from the amplifier above Troy's head 'How's that?' called the man

Troy gave him a thumb-s-up sign 'Clear as a bell'

'Not too loud'

'It's never too loud' He lit a cigarette, and watched the smoke climb steadily towards the ceiling Not a quiver he thought A bloody great row less than half an hour ago and my hand doesn't even shake At least it shows control More than Cynthia's got

The man in the leather jacket went round the tables lighting the candles and two musicians drifted in and began to unpack their instruments They noticed Troy and crossed over to the bar 'How's it going dad?' asked the one with the beard His name was Jack and he played the rhythm guitar

All right said Troy 'What's with you?'

'Same as always We're doing a gig tomorrow.'

'In town?'

'Out at Epping A quid apiece if we're lucky

'You coming?' asked the other man His name was George, and he played the double bass The fingers of his right hand were thickly calloused, the skin hard and yellow, like the rind of a lemon

'Too far,' said Troy.

George stood beside him and examined his fingers 'The thing is, I want a lift The Dormobile's in dock, and I've got to get that bloody fiddle over there somehow'

'You want to play something smaller'

'They won't let it on a bus,' said George 'I've had more

barneys with inspectors than I've had hot dinners.' He glanced up at Troy through the candle flame. 'You've got a drag, haven't you?'

'Not any more.'

'You had one the other week.'

'I got rid of it.'

'Well, d'you know someone who might be going?'

'I haven't a clue,' said Troy. 'But I'll ask around.'

'It's not all that far,' said George. 'It might be a fair old rave. Bags of booze, and plenty of chicks. You never know what might happen.'

But I do know, thought Troy. Five men and a double bass in the back of a car, with a girl determined to keep her drawers on. A fast grope maybe, but nothing more. 'I told you, I'll ask around,' he said.

'You'll let me know?'

'I'll do that,' promised Troy. He waved to the barmaid: 'Three bitters, dear.'

'I'll get them,' said George. He drained his glass in three long gulps. 'Better get weaving, then.' He tapped his horny index finger on Troy's chest. 'You won't forget?'

'No, I won't forget.'

The club was filling up. The amplifier coughed a few times, and then, as suddenly as if someone had pulled a switch the room was throbbing with music. Two couples began to dance, the men standing motionless, shifting slightly from one foot to another, while their partners spun in small circles, the line of their pants ridging their tight skirts. He had never brought Cynthia here; not that she had wanted to come. It was the competition he thought. That was what she couldn't take; it worried her to be matched against someone younger. Cynthia wanted to be unique, to be accepted as something special. And, of course, she was different. She walked differently, spoke a different language, made allowances that no one his age was prepared to make. But every concession was a defeat. She compromised because she had no choice. She lacked resilience.

The blonde with the pony-tail signalled to him from the foot of the stairs and he went to meet her. Her hair was the colour

of toffee, and he could see down the neck of her sweater 'he thought you might show up,' he said

'The trouble with Harry,' said Cynthia, 'is that he's spoiled. Everyone's always made a fuss of him. All his life he's been able to get what he wanted simply by asking for it. There's a lot of good in him, but he needs discipline. Otherwise, he's heading for trouble.' She chopped a garlic clove into tiny pieces and stirred it into a saucepan of peas. 'If we both eat some, we won't notice the smell,' she said.

The curtains were drawn and the kitchen was like a small, bright box, warm with the smells of cooking. Draper sat on a scrubbed wooden chair, his legs straddled on either side, his arms and chin resting on the back. It was months since he had been so comfortable. 'Harry's got money,' he said.

'Money's not the problem.'

'Is there any other kind of problem?'

She stirred the peas vigorously and his mouth watered. At first he had been reluctant to stay for a meal. Now he was impatient for it to begin. 'You'll find some eggs in the cupboard behind you,' said Cynthia. 'The fresh ones are on the second shelf.'

'How many?'

'Five,' said Cynthia. 'The big ones.'

She cracked the eggs into a basin and beat them with a fork. The routine was soothing. She was happy having something to do. 'Give me the omelette pan,' she said. 'The copper one, over there.'

She had bought it from a shop in Soho when she was first married and always she had obeyed the shopkeeper's instructions. She had never washed it. The most she had done was to rub round the inside with tissue paper and salt. 'The grease forms a second skin inside,' she explained.

'Doesn't it get dirty?'

'Of course not.'

'I like cooking,' he said. 'Not that I get much chance. But I used to get the dinner at home sometimes.' He corrected himself, 'Lunch, I mean.'

'What did you cook?'

'Nothing much. Meat and two veg. Jam tart.'

'I'm no good at pastry.'

'It's dead easy,' said Draper. 'Just a knack, really. Like riding a motor bike.'

'Can you do that too?'

'I've never tried. It was just a figure of speech. He watched her cutting bread, one hand holding the loaf steady, the other gripping the knife so that her knuckle showed white. You can judge character from the way people cut bread, he thought. She does it well, no crumbs, no mess, every slice the same thickness. Not like me, hacking the thing to death, committing murder with a blunt instrument.

'Knives and forks in the table drawer, she said. 'You don't mind eating in here?'

'Of course not.'

'Would you like some music?'

'Just as you like,' he said. 'What sort of music, anyway?'

She opened the door into the living room and pointed towards the record player. 'See for yourself. There's a pretty good selection.

He flipped through the glossy shelves. 'What about the MJQ?'

'You choose.'

Her tone was deliberate, neutral, he decided. 'Would you rather have something classical?'

'I don't mind.'

Another test coming up, thought Draper. Pick one thing and you're in. Pick another and you're ever so slightly out. He took a record from the rack at random. One corner of the sleeve was worn, as if it had often been handled. 'How about this?' he said. 'Does Mozart go well with omelettes?'

'I don't see why not.'

'All right, then,' said Draper. He put the record on the turntable, and carefully set the tone arm. There was a faint hiss as the needle jockeyed over the guide track, and the glad note of a horn whooped from the speaker.

He looked cautiously towards the kitchen, and saw instantly

that he had made the right choice. His omelette gleamed golden on the table, a corkscrew lay beside a bottle of wine, and Cynthia stood waiting. 'I can never manage this thing,' she said. 'See if you can get it open.'

'Fpping?' said Troy. 'Yes, I might go along. What about you?'

The blonde nodded, and her pony tail thrashed the back of her neck. 'I always go,' she said. 'Just for the giggle. About twenty of us usually pile in with the band. They always make room for the ravers.' Her name Troy discovered was Sally, and she worked as a typist in a City office.

'The Dormobile's laid up,' he said. 'George was trying to get me to give him a lift.'

'Are you going to?'

'I flogged my car a couple of weeks ago. I'll have to ask the old man if I can borrow his.'

'Will he let you?'

'I don't see why not.' He had made up his mind the moment she had said that she was going with the band. Probably, he would have to take George as well, but there was no law to say that he had to bring him back. It's a Zodiac, he said. 'There's bag of room. I've borrowed it before now.'

He edged a little closer and breathed in the scent of her skin, a mild mixture of soap and talcum powder, the smell he thought of a newly bathed baby. She wore almost no make-up, her skin was fresh, and as she sucked an orange drink through a straw, her pursed lips were plump and pink. Casually, he put his arm round her and stroked her bare arm. She squirmed against him and pinned his thumb against the firm cushion of her breast. 'That gives me goose pimples,' she said.

'Where?'

Sally giggled and blew bubbles in her drink. 'All over.'

'Let me see,' he said, and with his other hand reached for the edge of her sweater.

Instantly she stood up, still smiling, but with the table between them. She snapped her fingers in time to the music. 'Come and dance,' she said.

The wine was straw-coloured, and with a faint tinge of green at the heart of the glass. Draper held it up to the light and squinted at the brilliant core. He had drunk half the bottle and felt deliciously relaxed. Cynthia, he realised, had drunk very little. He turned the bottle so that the label faced him, and read aloud 'Meursault'. He looked up for approval. 'Did I pronounce it right?'

'Absolutely.'

'I used to enjoy French at school. Always meant to keep on with it, but there never seemed to be the time.'

'You could still take lessons.'

'Go back to school?'

'There are plenty of courses.'

'Part all that,' he said. 'Don't think I could face the routine.' His eyes were feeling sandy again, and without warning, his jaw gaped in an irresistible yawn. He tried to smother it with his hand, but the second yawn was even more prolonged. The sides of his face ached with the strain.

'Coffee,' said Cynthia. 'You find another record while I make it.'

'Can I help?'

'You look after the music,' she said. 'That's what I call being helpful.'

It was quite dark now. The gas fire bared the hearth and rug in soft coral, and outside, lonely pockets of fluorescence burned holes in the black hulk of office buildings. Draper drew the curtains, shutting the night out. The room was like an island, a warm and private place which offered sanctuary. He changed the record and lay down on the settee. The MJQ bonged stealthily in the background, and he closed his eyes, imagining cobwebs spun out of glass, tremulous in a south wind.

He was asleep when Cynthia came in with the coffee, breathing deeply, his hands clasped behind his head. For almost a minute she stood watching him, and then, careful to make no sound, she put down the tray, and squatted on the floor, her eyes fixed on his sleeping face.

This was how she had watched David, she thought, years ago.

now Newly married, and ridiculously young, she had spent her days at the Air Ministry, rushing home at night to await his call. At the weekends she had travelled to meet him; freezing in slow blacked-out trains, sitting in the lobbies of provincial hotels, where dog-eared copies of *Picture Post* lay in drifts, and waiters ignored her signals. It was winter and the rooms were always cold. Often, the sheets were rough, and with singular clarity she remembered a rayon-covered quilt that slithered persistently off the bed. She was always tired, but unwilling to sleep. After they had made love, and David was huddled motionless on his side of the bed, she had switched on the lamp and lain beside him, propped on one elbow, studying his face.

He was not handsome. His features were clumsy, and his hair badly cut, but there was strength there, and an innocence which had never left him. He was killed before it could be destroyed, diving down in his wrecked plane into the city which he had set alight. Draper stirred slightly and she touched his face with her hand. They were about the same age, the living and the dead. But she was older, she reminded herself, older, and uglier and consumed by loneliness.

Draper opened one eye and yawned. 'Sorry,' he said, 'but I was so comfortable.'

'That's all right. Stay where you are.' She poured his coffee and handed him the sugar bowl. The grains of sugar were like coloured glass splinters of red, green and blue, as if a doll's necklace had come unstrung in the basin. He helped himself, and lay back again, the cup and saucer balanced on his chest.

'If they could see me now,' he said.

'If who could see you?'

'The people at the digs.' He blew on the coffee and took a tentative sip. 'It's a pretty grim place. Stew to eat, no heat in the bedroom, and a row every night about the telly.'

'Why don't you move?'

Draper hesitated, and struggled upright while he phrased a reply. It seemed wrong, somehow, to talk about money. 'It's handy for work,' he said.

'And what about work. Do you enjoy what you're doing?'

'It's all right.'

'You don't sound very keen.'

He swung his legs off the settee and leaned forward intently. 'I always wanted to be a journalist, and you've got to start somewhere. It was either Fenning or a local paper. I didn't want that.'

'What do you hope to do?'

'I don't know. One of the nationals maybe. Write for the telly. It depends where I can break in.'

Cynthia felt the warmth of the fire soak through her skirt. She smothered it down and the material toasted the length of one thigh. 'Can you move over,' she said. 'It's getting hot down here.'

'Roast pork,' said Draper.

'I beg your pardon?'

'Sorry. It was something my father used to say.' He bounded over to one end of the settee, and patted the cushion beside him. 'I used to lie in front of the fire with a book, just like an animal. Look up all the room. My father used to say he could smell me cooking.'

She laughed and as he looked at her in profile, he saw her teeth reflect the firelight as if they had been brushed with pink enamel. 'It's not very funny,' he said. 'I don't really get on with my parents.'

'That's fairly common.'

'I suppose it is. But they seem to think I'm unique. Thoughtless and unique.'

She covered his hand with her own. 'You're not thoughtless. In fact, you're very kind.'

'I'm not,' he said. 'I just don't like to see people hurt.' Her short hair framed her face like a fur cap, and as she turned her head he could see a vein fluttering at the base of her throat. 'I was glad you told Harry to get out,' he said.

She held his hand for a moment longer, then let it go. 'It wasn't as sudden as all that,' she said. 'It wasn't done on the spur of the moment. He made me angry but it had been coming for a long time.'

'Were you very fond of him?'

'I loved him,' she said 'That's probably not a very proper thing to say Not dignified anyway But I did love him'

'I see,' said Draper He felt confused, and a little embarrassed Other people's confessions always put him at a disadvantage They were made, unconsciously sometimes, in the hope of provoking a reaction But, often, he had reacted, not only violently, but inappropriately Lately, he had learned to be more cautious Until he was familiar with the argument, he chose to be non committal

'I don't bear him any grudge,' said Cynthia 'I'm still very fond of him But it's finished I don't want him back here'

Draper tried to make his voice sound deep and reassuring 'I think you're very wise,' he said

She took his hand again pressing it into the cushion Not wise,' she said, 'but my instincts are good I know how to stay alive'

'It's all right for tomorrow, then,' said Troy 'I'll pick you up around seven, and we'll see the others on the way

Better make it a quarter to,' said Sally 'They've got to be there on time'

As they came out of the underground station, Troy took her arm She wore a light poplin raincoat and through it he could feel her bones as fine as a bird's The rain had stopped, and there was a smell of wet dust and drying pavements

'It's not far,' she said 'I reckon it takes me about five minutes'

'You live at home?'

'With Mummy and Daddy They say I'm too young to be on my own'

'Do you mind?'

She pushed back her head scarf, and under the street lamp he saw the delicate fuzz of hair fringing her temples 'I get a bit fed-up sometimes, but it's cheaper than living by myself.'

'What about boy friends?'

'What *about* boy friends'

'They don't think you're too young to have them?'

'So long as there's more than one Daddy says there's safety in numbers.'

'What else does Daddy say?' In his mind's eye, Troy was sketching their faces: Daddy with a small moustache and rimless glasses; Mummy with a blue rinse and a permanent wave. Instinctively he knew, and disliked them.

'We don't talk much,' said Sally. 'Just in the mornings, and at meals. I'm out most of the time.'

'At the club you mean?'

'There and other places.'

'I've never seen you anywhere else.'

She shrugged impatiently. 'I don't suppose you know all the places I go to. I move around. There are millions of places.'

'All right,' said Troy. 'I only remarked I wasn't putting you on trial.'

They walked in silence to the corner. Behind the trees a clock struck eleven, and Sally felt in her purse. 'I've got to go,' she said.

'It's early yet.'

'I know, but if I'm going to be late tomorrow, it saves an argument.'

'I suppose you're right. She expects to be late,' he told himself. 'Late, and far away from here. I don't even know your last name,' he said. 'If I'm picking you up tomorrow, I ought to know that.'

She gnawed at her bottom lip before replying. 'You promise not to laugh?'

'I won't laugh.'

'Some people make jokes about it.'

'Not me.'

'All right,' she said. 'It's Virtue. I can't help it. I was born with it.'

Troy held her arms lightly, and kissed her on the forehead. 'There's nothing wrong with it, he said. 'Nothing at all. Look at my name. I sound like an ancient monument.'

She came closer, and he held her tightly, nuzzling her ear so that she could not see his grin. 'In any case,' he said, 'for a maiden name, it's very appropriate.'

When Draper came out of the bathroom, Cynthia was on her feet. The coffee cups had been cleared away, and without ostentation she glanced at her watch.

'I should help you wash up,' he said.

'It can wait till morning.'

'Positive?' He knew that it was time to go, but desperately sought reasons to stay.

'I always clear up in the morning. At this time of night, I'm too exhausted to do a thing.'

He still hesitated. 'I could do them while you sit down.'

'I wouldn't think of it. Her voice was quite cheerful now and he accepted his dismissal.

'It was a marvellous meal,' he said. 'The whole evening was marvellous. He cleared his throat nervously. 'Would you have a meal with me sometime?'

'I'd love to.' She looked at her watch again. 'You've missed the last tube. Would you like me to ring for a taxi?'

Draper rapidly calculated the amount in his pocket and then shook his head. 'I'll walk,' he said. 'I often take a stroll before turning in. It helps me to sleep.'

'You shouldn't have difficulty in sleeping.'

Sometimes I worry about things.

'You're not worried now.' A statement, he noted, not a question.

'A bit,' he said. 'I'm worried about you.'

She handed him his coat and picked a scrap of lint from the collar. 'There's no need to worry about me. I've had worse things happen to me than Harry Troy.'

'What sort of things?'

She opened the door and stepped out on to the landing. 'Another time,' she said. 'You've got to go home now.'

As he paused at the top of the stairs she kissed him lightly on the cheek. It was efficient and impersonal, an aunt's kiss, and when he turned she had already moved away. 'I'll give you a ring,' he said.

'Please do.'

'Good night, then.'

'Good night.'

She stood in the open doorway, listening to the clatter of his footsteps down the stairs, and then the distant slam of the street door. He's too young, she thought, much too young. Her arms pumped in the sudden chill and she went inside. The soldiers held their ranks on the book-case and with a strange tenderness, she lifted the dead man from the ambulance.

The small leaden body lay in the palm of her hand and she stroked its battered face. He was right about that, she thought. He knows the difference between life and death. Her fingers closed over it, and walking almost gaily she went into the kitchen to wash up, as she always did, before going to bed.

3

'A dog can't sing,' said Draper, 'it's physically impossible. I read an article about it somewhere. There was something about the shape of its mouth. It can't form consonants.'

Lenning appeared not to have heard him. 'The owner's name is Mr Banks, 10 Wilberforce Road. Have you got that?' He waited while Draper wrote it down, elaborately patient, nodding at his desk as he spelled out each word. 'Bill Brewster already there,' he said. 'Just try not to balls things up.'

'What do you want me to do then?'

'Whatever's necessary. Phone over the copy, most likely. If we've got opposition, Brewster'll want to stav put.'

Draper glanced up through the grating. For a change it was fine. He could even see small, white clouds through the patina of mud on the window. 'I'd better take a cab,' he said.

'If you want to pay for it yourself.'

'I thought this was urgent.'

'Just get there,' said Lenning. 'And let us know when you arrive.'

Draper stuffed his notebook into his pocket. It was always the same, he thought. Panic one minute, and the old heavy hand the next. There was no point in arguing. It was the natural order of things, like rain on Bank Holidays, and packets of crisps with no salt in them. The light on the stairs had fused, and he clambered up cautiously, holding on to the banisters like a conductor rail. In the dark the smell was somehow stronger. He stopped half-way up and cast around, trying to trace the component parts. There was cabbage, followed a close second by cats, with onions, and gravy, and custard bringing up the rear. Possibly it was dangerous. In sewers there were sometimes explosions when pockets of gas were touched off by a naked flame. Holding his breath, he ran up to the top and flung open the street door.

Buses rolled by, one after the other, like a string of tame oxen. A boy on a bicycle rode past, whistling off key. Draper filled his lungs with London soot, and immediately felt better. Sometimes the office was like a dungeon, damp and odorous, without even privacy as compensation.

On the bus he checked the address again. Mr Banks was obviously a nut case, a retired civil servant who had finally gone round the bend when he was parted from his mid morning cup of tea. That was probably what kept them all docile, thought Draper. A mild sedative was mixed with the sugar. Three lumps and they were set for the day. Not that he really sounded cracked. Fleming had spoken to him on the phone for half an hour before sending Brewer out there. Mr Banks had claimed quite calmly, that his dog could sing. He could even name the tunes, and *of Hope and Glory* was the dog's favourite, with *Red River Valley* a runner-up. It sounded crazy, but at least it was better than sitting in court all day.

For pity. He felt in his pocket for change as the conductress swung along the top deck, pulling her elf from post to post, like an orange.

Wilberforce road? Lightpenny

He counted the coins into her palm and wondered how she managed to remove the prime. It was a bloody awful job, murder on the feet and exhausting too. All that backchat was probably just a way of keeping their minds off how boring it all was.

Nice day, he said.

'All right for some.'

'Better than yesterday.'

'I was off yesterday.'

'Ah well,' said Draper. 'We can't all be lucky.'

The conductress swung away, her haunches straining at the blue serge, and Draper watched with interest. Uniforms affected character: there was no doubt about it. Off duty she was probably quite a dish, but on the bus she adopted quarter-deck manners, tactics to keep the customers in their place. Impossible to think of a mutiny on a London Passenger vehicle. The bus slowed down at a request stop, and Draper peered

down at the pavement. He liked to see who was getting on. Troy called it talent spotting, and swore that he had picked up a smashing redhead on a number 13 between Blackfriars and Piccadilly Circus. But Draper remained resolutely sceptical. At any rate, he thought, Cynthia would never let herself be picked up on a bus.

With hands clasped neatly in his lap, Mr Banks sat in the exact centre of his armchair. It was upholstered in brown uncut moquette, and Mr Banks – pale and composed in a linen suit – had the naked look of a peeled almond on a ginger nut. 'I assure you that I am not in the habit of making unconsidered statements,' he said. 'I have kept most careful notes over the past six months and I can assure you, quite unequivocally, that Trixie can sing.'

'I'm not doubting you,' said Brewer. 'But she hasn't done it today.'

Mr Banks took off his glasses and polished them on a scrap of chamois leather. 'She is a sensitive animal. The conditions have to be exactly right. Any kind of hostility in the atmosphere, and she becomes most distressed.' His voice was thin, but positive. Each word was subjected to a brief but powerful scrutiny before he let it go, and as he spoke Brewer envisaged a slowly-mounting stack of metal discs, each one of them engraved with a single paragraph, punched out of the complete text, stored within Mr Banks' skull.

'I have to ask questions,' he said. 'That's part of my job.'

Mr Banks inclined his head. 'I am prepared to answer any questions. I told Mr Fenning as much. But they must be asked in the proper spirit.'

'I understand.' Brewer took out a packet of cigarettes and offered them to Mr Banks. 'Smoke?'

Mr Banks recoiled slightly, and an expression of distaste puckered his face. 'No, thank you,' he said. 'And I must ask you to wait until you are outside. I find that Trixie is allergic to smoke of any kind. It was for that reason we went over to oil heating. Very expensive, of course, but I believe that a unique animal deserves the utmost consideration.'

He leaned forward to pat the small black and white terrier sprawled at his feet. 'It is a great responsibility,' he said. 'Mrs Banks and I feel that we have been chosen as guardians.' He paused for a moment and studied his fingernails. 'The expenses have proved to be extremely heavy,' he said.

Brewer allowed time for the sentence to become decently absorbed in the carpet. 'Perhaps we could help . . .'

His voice trailed away, and Draper marvelled at the wholly unexpected reserves of tact which he could summon up. The profane, nose-picking Brewer, immured in cigarette ash, and contemptuous of any kind of softness, had been replaced by a quiet, attentive man who wore discretion like a made-to-measure shirt.

There was also a change in Mr Banks. 'A hundred and fifty,' he said.

Brewer shook his head regretfully. 'I'm afraid that's out of the question.'

'A hundred and twenty-five.'

'Still too high.'

'A hundred then. That's the very least I could consider.'

Brewer pulled out a pencil and notebook, and made rapid calculations. 'Story and pictures exclusive to us,' he said. 'You don't talk to anyone else, and you let us know if you're approached by any other paper.'

'What about syndication?'

Brewer smiled gently. 'You've really been into this, haven't you?' he said.

'All right then. Fifty per cent. That's the absolute maximum.'

Mr Banks nodded once, like a bird pecking up a choice crumb. 'Agreed.'

The terrier reared up and scratched herself. Then she sat back and grinned, her tongue hanging moistly from one side of her jaw. Mr Banks tickled her chest. 'Sing, Trixie,' he said, 'let's have some music.' He began to beat time, wagging his finger in front of the dog's muzzle, and Draper felt his own head rocking slightly from side to side, obedient to the rhythm. Trixie watched the finger intently, and then without warning, threw back her head and opened her mouth.

Musically, thought Draper, the performance could be faulted. It was a trifle flat and the tempo was ragged. But without doubt the sounds that issued from between the tenners' sharp white teeth added up to a version, just as Mr Banks had claimed, of *Land of Hope and Glory*.

Mrs Banks was less tidy than her husband. Her face was parched to the colour of pale manila and her false teeth were slightly loose. She wore a mauve rayon blouse and a coral necklace savaged her throat. When she poured coffee her wedding ring slid towards the knuckle joint of her finger and slid back again when she set the coffee pot down. She was like an old spring mattress, thought Draper. The ticking was still intact but inside everything was coming adrift.

We didn't teach Trixie to sing, she said. It happened by itself.

'Can you remember the first time?' asked Brewer. He was making detailed notes now, covering the pages of his notebook with hieroglyphics and contraction. A c'm v' reporter's short hand. It was fast but only Brewer could read it back.

It's almost a year ago now, said Mr Banks. We were listening to the Sunday Night play, something about a clergyman's family.

Trollope, said Mrs Banks.

'When Trixie started to scratch at the door. We thought she wanted to go out. But after a while she came back and sat by the fire with the most peculiar expression on her face.

It was positively soulful, said Mrs Banks. You could see she wanted to tell us something. She knew what she was going to do.

And what did she do?

You heard her, said Mr Banks. She sang. Of course it wasn't as good as she can do it now. Her voice wasn't developed, you see. But there wasn't any doubt about it. She sang just 'for us'.

'I always did like Elgar, said Mrs Banks. I think Trixie knew that. She wanted to please us.'

Draper sipped his coffee. The only dog he had ever owned was a cross between a Labrador and an Alsatian, and it had

never wanted to please anyone. Once, when his father had moved its feeding bowl to open the door, it had sunk its teeth into his leg and refused to let go. His mother had always insisted that it was misunderstood.

'It must have heard the song before then,' said Brewer. 'I mean, if it knew what you liked, it must have heard the music played somewhere.'

'On the wireless, perhaps,' said Mrs Banks. 'But you know, dogs have senses which are denied to humans. They're attuned to much more delicate vibrations than we can ever appreciate.'

'F S P,' said Mr Banks, cryptically. 'Extra Sensory Perception.' He tapped Brewer on the knee. 'A dog can see a ghost,' he declared.

'You mean that Trixie's seen a ghost?'

Mr and Mrs Banks exchanged glances. 'You might say that,' said Mr Banks, 'but it's no part of the story.'

'Everything's part of the story,' said Brewer. 'We want to prove what a sensitive dog Trixie is. Everything is relevant. You just give me the facts and I'll knock them into shape.' He pointed his pencil at Mr Banks. 'Now, what about the ghost?'

It was amazing thought Draper. You find the freak dog belonging to a money-grubbing crank, serve it up with stuff about other worlds and F S P, and sell the whole thing as a five-part series to one of the Sunday's for five times the money you paid for it. The economics of the operation intrigued him.

'We were walking past that house where a woman was found murdered,' said Mr Banks, 'when Trixie sat down and simply refused to move. I tried to pull her along, but she wouldn't budge.'

Probably, thought Draper, she wanted to pee. 'Were there any other dogs about?' he asked.

Brewer glared at him over his shoulder. 'In asking the questions,' he said, 'you can get back to the office. I'll be ringing through after lunch.' He turned back to Mr Banks. 'As I understand it,' he said, 'Trixie sensed some supernatural force...'

Mr Banks nodded earnestly. 'That's exactly what it was,' he said.

The menu in Rômani's café was chalked on a small black-board, propped against the tea urn. There was a choice of Braised Steak and Two Veg, Fillet of Cod with Chips, Sausages and Chips, and Egg and Chips. To follow there was Suet Pudding with Syrup, and Ice Creams, Various. Behind the counter, Mr Teal stropped his nails on an emery board. 'Braised Steak is off,' he said.

'Why not rub it off the board then?'

'It was on,' said Mr Teal. 'But people liked it.'

People were stark raving mad, decided Draper. 'I'll have the egg and chips,' he said. 'Two portions of chips.'

The lunch hour rush was over and the café was half empty. At a corner table beneath a notice which said NO BETTING ALLOWED, a bookmaker's runner counted his slips. By the window two women fed alternate spoonfuls of ice cream and suet pudding to a small coloured boy. They were both blonde, with tight skirts and stiletto heels. The tip of their cigarettes were encrusted with lipstick, and their scent fought its way to Draper's table through layers of cooking smells.

'I think he's a rotten sod,' said the one with the ice cream. 'He knew you might go inside this time. The very least he could have done was to bring the film round.'

'I dunno,' said the other. 'He's all right really. He couldn't very well show up here. They've got a warrant out for him.'

A waitress set the plate of egg and chips in front of Draper, and he stared at it suspiciously. There was a smear of black grease on the rim of the plate and he pointed it out, aware that Mr Teal was watching him.

'Something wrong?'

'Nothing serious,' said Draper. 'Just a spot of grease.'

'A clean plate,' suggested Mr Teal.

'Honestly,' said Draper.

'No trouble,' said Mr Teal, sliding the egg and chips on to a plate which he produced from beneath the counter. 'Must keep the regulars happy.'

The new plate was cold, and as Draper watched, an aureole of congealed fat formed about the egg. The chips began to wilt, and he ate quickly, stuffing them into his mouth before the last

trace of heat was absorbed by the earthenware. Dear mother, he thought, you will never know the hazards of working in the big city. You may think it is all fun and games. But that is the Snare and a Delusion . . .

'It's a Snare and a Delusion,' he said as Troy joined him. 'My parents don't know what I have to put up with.'

'Like what?'

'Stuff like this. There ought to be a law against it.'

'Why eat it, then? You've got yourself a nice little billet.'

Draper put down his knife and fork. 'For Christ's sake,' he said, 'you pick a fight, and then leave me to cope. What am I supposed to do—leave her to kill herself?'

Troy lit a cigarette and blew the smoke at a fly that was patrolling the sugar basin. 'Not a hope,' he said. 'Cynthia's as tough as old boots. The only way you'll put her down is to hit her with a truck.'

'You don't mean that.'

'Of course I mean it.'

Draper felt a hot ball of rage slowly float up from his stomach and he gripped the edge of the table to give his hands something to do. 'I like her,' he said. 'I think she's pretty unhappy, and if she wants me to stick around, that's what I'm going to do.' He was out of breath and his legs were trembling slightly as if he had run a great distance.

Troy flicked the ash from his cigarette and grinned crookedly. 'That's all right with me. I don't mind in the least. But you ought to know what you're letting yourself in for.'

'I don't want to know.' He realized that he had spoken too loudly. Mr. Leal was watching him with undisguised interest, and the two women had turned to inspect him for the first time since he had come in. 'I don't want to know,' he repeated, more quietly. 'I want to find out for myself. I don't want you telling me *your* version of things. I want you to keep out of it.'

Troy raised both hands, palms forward. 'Take it easy,' he said, 'don't get in a panic. Nobody's going to interfere.' He pushed the cigarettes across the table. 'I just didn't want you to take on more than you could handle.'

He might even be telling the truth, thought Draper. But even

so it was a liberty Troy was so sure of himself so absolutely, insufferably sure Cynthia was right about him She knew exactly what made him tick, and Troy disliked her knowing She had said he was spoiled Always, she said he had been allowed to have his own way You want to mind your own business he said

It is my business in a way I got you into it'

'Thank's very much

'Now look Troy began and then he paused 'Just one thing' he said don't get too attached You'll save yourself a lot of trouble if you keep that in mind

Do you want a tea'

'All right, said Troy but don't forget what I said

Draper ignored him and signalled to Mr Teal Two tons he said on my bill'

'It's a marvellous story, said Basil Fenning right up your street No one else is on to it You've got first call With his feet on the desk and the telephone jammed between his shoulder and his jaw he bulged in his suit as if contained in a tweed hammock No he said of course not I wouldn't dream of hawking it around You know I always come to you first He scribbled on the pad in his lap 'Brewer's doing an outline now Just to give you a better idea He waved at Brewer who held up one finger In an hour - say an hour and a half I'll come down myself Fine See you then He replaced the receiver and blew his nose loudly

His face was pink and moist Talking of money always brought Fenning out into a sweat He blew his nose again stuffed the handkerchief into his pocket and rubbed his hands together Every action was larger than life He dispensed energy like an aerosol spray Take a deep breath, thought Draper, and you ran the risk of serious infection

'What about pictures?' he asked

'Tomorrow,' said Fenning 'We'll use one of the local boys Tommy Hall should be able to handle it Full coverage but nothing fancy You'd better go along with him when we've got the outline'

He peered over Brewer's shoulder and read aloud from the typescript. Can a human soul inhabit a dog's body? This is the belief of Mr Herbert Banks retired civil servant and his wife Emily. Says Mrs Banks. I have definite proof that Trixie has tried to communicate with us'

I think that's the line said Brewer. 'There's bag, of angles. He's got a great dossier on the bloody thing. What it eats, where it sleeps, what colours it likes.' He rolled a fresh sheet of paper into the machine. Draper's got to keep clear though Mrs Banks says he's got an unhealthy aura - muddy brown. She says it upsets Trixie.

She must be off her trolley said Draper.

Fenning raised an eyebrow. That's a matter of opinion. Could be that Trixie's a lot brighter than any of us. Anyway we don't want them upset. You'd better stay away. Get on to Tommy Hill and give him the address. He can meet Bill there in the morning.

Brewer handed him the final page and he read it through, grunting at the end of each sentence. What about this haunted house? Who was it that got done in?

A woman said Draper. She was having it off with the lodger and her husband found out.

Fenning smiled benevolently. So we've got sex too. He folded the typescript in half and jerked a tubby thumb towards Draper. Check up on it tomorrow. The Gazette's the best place. They've got files that go back to the Ark. He slipped the typescript into his pocket and patted his chest. We all have our offdays he said. But a thing like this restores your faith in human nature.

The picture hung at the foot of the stairs. It was a seascape done in oils, and beneath the varnish a frigate and two small rowing boats foundered among waves the size of Nelson's Column. Draper unscrewed his fountain pen and carefully drew a seagull over the frigate's mast. It was coming along, he thought. When he had first arrived in the house there had been only four gulls like ticks in an exercise book, sketched against the livid sky. Each week he had supplemented the flock, adding one at a time until the once blank canvas was punctuated by a skein of birds twisting ominously over the boiling water. The previous month Billany had pencilled in a drowning man, but Draper had rubbed it out. Gulls, he felt, were natural phenomena which would attract Mrs Barrow's attention only if the colony doubled itself overnight. Men were something different. Already he had noticed the slightly baffled expression on Mrs Barrow's face as she paused in the hall—a look almost, of apprehension as if she was beginning to doubt her own senses. As a result he had rationed himself to one bird a fortnight. In that way the pleasure was prolonged.

Upstairs and in his own room he emptied his pocket of pebbles and arranged them on the window-sill in order of size. There was no one in the road below, and carefully judging the distance, he flicked the first missile into space. It landed a little to the right of a mob of pigeons, strutting across the tarmac with small, self-important steps. One of them looked like Fenning, patrolling the gutter with its tail feathers fanned out like a pack of cards, burbling a liquid invitation to the female ahead of it. Draper took aim and launched another pebble but it plummeted down to bounce harmlessly off a drain cover. It was hopeless, he thought—all pigeons were protected against fire, flood, earthquake, and Acts of God. In London they died of old age. Not that he had anything against pigeons themselves.

It was simply that they had personalities. So many of them were like people he knew. There was not only a Fenning among the flock below, but also a Brewer (rather tatty with chocolate-coloured primaries), a Mrs Barrow (blonde and matronly with a breast like a feather bolster) and – unmistakably – a feathered version of Mr Beadle, senile and sedentary but wholly assured of its place in the sun.

Draper was in retreat from Mr Beadle. Five minutes earlier he had slunk out of the lounge followed by the whoops of a band of Apaches surrounding a wagon train. The pioneers were outnumbered, ammunition was running low, and the scout was still searching for the cavalry. I only wish Draper had sighed, that they'd got the facts right.

Mr Beadle had surfaced from the depth of his chair. 'What facts?

Clothes for one thing. Apaches never dressed like that.'

You're an authority on Apaches?

I've read about them.

Mr Beadle had allowed time for the information to travel the room. You've read about them.

I like Westerns. Draper had protested suddenly aware of his vulnerability.

As entertainment, no doubt?

That, right. They're good for a laugh.

For several seconds Mr Beadle had transferred his attention to the screen while half the riding party died violent deaths, then he had turned back to Draper. So what does it matter what they wear?

It's no more trouble to get it right than to get it wrong.

You're the only one who seems to care.

It's my job. They teach me that accuracy's important.

Compassionately Mr Beadle had placed one fat hand on Draper's knee. His expression had seemed to indicate real regret. You've been corrupted, son. It's all that talk you've been hearing about education. You don't want to take any notice of what Mr Evans says. We know Mr Evans wants education. Very likely he needs it. But you mustn't confuse it with Entertainment. They're two different things.

In quick succession Draper flicked three pebbles at the pigeons on the road. They took off with a clap of wings, all except the Beadle bird who sat engrossed over a nugget of dung. It looked up briefly, its red eyes shrewd and unwinking, but it did not move. Draper slammed his window shut and pressed his forehead against the glass. Even a pigeon could make him feel defeated.

It was a heavy, all-over feeling, as if lead filings had been fed into each vein. Possibly it was a sign of malnutrition, the result of too many lean lunches at Roman's, and the fodder served up each evening by Mrs Barrow. He turned from the window and stared into the mirror on the dressing table. It was not the face of a thriving man, but there were shadows beneath the eyes, and the chin was bumpy with blackheads. He squeezed the biggest one, and then jumped back guiltily as the bedroom door swung open.

‘‘Hear you had a bit of a barney with old Beadle,’’ said Mr Evans.

Draper blew his nose, and surreptitiously wiped his chin with his handkerchief. The usual thing, he said, nothing to worry about.

‘‘It gets on your wick, though.’’

‘‘I don’t suppose he’s much else to do. I mean, he’s retired. He probably spends all day working out his next move.’’

‘‘Mr Evans sat down heavily on the bed and stared round the room. ‘‘Bit bleak up here, isn’t it?’’ he said. ‘‘I mean, with no heat and that.’’

‘‘I’m out most of the time,’’ said Draper. ‘‘I work all hours, and I’ve got friends to visit.’’

‘‘Many friends?’’

‘‘Quite a few. In my line, you get to know a lot of people.’’

‘‘I suppose you do.’’ Mr Evans took out an oilskin pouch and rolled himself a cigarette. He licked the gummed edge of the paper, and squinted up at Draper. ‘‘Shall I do you one?’’

Draper shook his head. ‘‘Too strong for me. I don’t smoke much anyway. Can’t afford it.’’

The shag in Mr Evans’ cigarettes flared like a twist of grass.

caught in a bonfire and, luxuriously, he blew a mouthful of smoke towards the ceiling 'It's my only real vice,' he said 'The wife couldn't stand it though It's probably why we split up'

'I didn't know you were married'

'I'm not any more' said Mr Evans 'We got divorced five years back Bloody good job too He puffed at the cigarette and the underside of his moustache glowed red like the bar of an electric fire Of course he said 'that's confidential I don't mind telling you I mean it's like keeping it in the family you being from the north, and that But it's no business of those old seds downstairs'

Draper nodded flinching inwardly at the intimacy that was developing It was the old, inevitable alliance, provincials united nosing each other out along the alleys of the south They were like dogs he thought himself included nostrils cocked for a familiar scent hustling at strangers and running in a pack There was no common breed no common interests, but uniting them was a never admitted feeling of inferiority They were yecomen banding together against the city slickers They talked about neighbourliness and honesty and grit, virtues never found south of Edgbaston Draper took a deep breath 'Some of them are all right,' he said

Oh they're all right said Mr Evans but they're not our sort The light was going fast and his jawline showed black as if it had been brushed with charcoal 'I thought we might have a drink together,' he said.

Draper patted his pockets 'I'm out short till tomorrow'

Mr Evans opened the window and slipped out his cigarette and 'Don't bother about that' he said 'have one on me If we can't help one another now and then, it's a poor look-out I mean, we've got to stick together in a place like this'

It was in the third pub that they saw Ernie Cope, and it was his shoes that Draper noticed first They were long, black and highly polished, glinting like lacquered wedges beneath tight blue trousers and a four button jacket His hair glistened too It was cut short, and lay close to his scalp like fur stirred slightly

by the wind. He wore a white shirt with a button down collar; a tie with black horizontal stripes on a dark blue background, and there was a gold signet ring on the little finger of his right hand.

His face was pale and composed and he was standing alone at the corner of the bar. Draper waved to him and Cope raised his glass of orange juice in reply.

Mr Evans leaned across the table. 'Who's that?'

'Just someone I know.'

'Looks like a wide boy.' Imperceptibly Mr Evans' accent had broadened and his voice was heavy with suspicion.

Draper shook his head. 'He's a reporter on the *Gazette*. Very good at his job.'

'He needs to be with clothes like that.'

Draper stared curiously at Mr Evans' red lips, sensing the rancour behind the word. It was stupid, he decided, the thick, immemorial voice of the tripper gawking at the unfamiliar vista and declaring it not merely odd but immoral. There's nothing wrong with his clothes, he said. Not everyone has to dress alike. There's no law to say where you've got to buy your suit.

'Mightn't be a bad idea for some.'

'You think you know better than the rest of us?'

'I didn't say that.'

'It's what you meant.'

Mr Evans scratched his chin and his nails ticked against the stubble like someone running a finger along the teeth of a comb. Look, lad, he said. I'm not trying to tell anyone to do anything. I was just expressing an opinion.

'My boss calls me 'lad', said Draper. 'I don't like it much.' His face felt hot and he pushed his glass to one side. It was still half full of beer and the froth slapped against the rim. Mr Evans had paid for it. Mr Evans had paid for his drinks all evening. 'I've had enough,' he said.

'Hang on then while I finish mine.'

'I'm not coming right away,' said Draper. 'I want a word with that bloke whose clothes you don't like.'

There was a short and awful silence before Mr Evans drained

his glass and set it down with a slight bang on the table. 'Suit yourself,' he said, 'I'm off.'

'See you back at the digs then.'

'Very likely, seeing we both live there.'

At the bar Ernie Cope still sipped his orange juice. All four buttons of his jacket were done up and his expression was quite unchanged. That was what upset Mr Evans and his sort, thought Draper. They distrusted the serenity that enclosed people like Ernie as completely as a skin of silicone. It was rust-proof, chip-proof, and heat-resistant. Beneath it all the parts were in working order, and they could not be touched. It was nothing to admire, but it was nothing to resent either. In most cases, it was simply a physical fact, as natural as a navel. Not to Mr Evans, though. He saw it either as an affectation, or as part of the campaign waged by the unfeeling south against the passionate north. It was as suspect as yoghurt or striped sheets (both southern fads). It was arrogance masquerading as disinterest. It was a denial of ordinary human feelings. Worst of all, it was something he could not understand.

'Thanks for the drinks,' said Draper. 'We'll square up next time.'

'Whenever that is,' said Mr Evans. 'I'll be pretty busy for the next week or so. I'm starting a Russian class on Monday. You've got to keep at it when you take on something like that.'

Draper nodded with what he hoped looked like enthusiasm. 'I'm sure you have. I wish I had your interests.'

For a moment a flicker of hope gilded Mr Evans' face, like a random shaft of sunlight; then it died away. 'I was going to suggest you came along, but I know they're full up.' He glanced at the bar, and instinctively squared his shoulders. 'See you in the morning, then.'

'In the morning,' said Draper.

He waited until the door swung to and then picked up his glass. Tension had made him thirsty. It was a pity about Mr Evans, but there was nothing he could do about it. In any case, there had been no real quarrel, and he had made his position clear at last. The provincials could soldier on without him. Cope was not a friend, but he was a colleague. They were in the

same business and they were about the same age. If it came to taking sides he knew where he stood.

'That was someone from the digs,' he told Cope. 'We went out on the beer.'

Cope swallowed the last of his orange juice. 'I'm not gone on beer. I like shorts or this stuff. I've only got a half pint bladder.'

'Like my father.'

Cope said nothing. Gossip was not in his line; any information he volunteered was strictly relevant. Draper had noticed before how he listened, and saved his breath. Sometimes it could be restful, but always his silence left a vacuum to be filled.

'I was coming round the *Gazette* tomorrow,' he said. 'Fenning thinks I might be able to dig up something from your files.'

'What about?'

There was an instant quickening of interest as if a small motor had started up beneath Cope's poplin shirt. He was a good reporter. Troy always said it was simply a matter of time before he was picked up by one of the dailies. Already, he acted as stringer for three of them, doubling sometimes trebling his salary by supplying them with local stories. All he needed was the one big item to bring him to the notice of a News Editor on the lookout for new talent.

'We're doing this series about a dog,' said Draper. 'It's supposed to sing.'

'And does it?'

'Now and then,' Draper counted the coins in his pocket and calculated that there was enough for one more drink. 'Anyway,' he said, 'the owner reckons it's psychic too. He says it's seen a ghost.'

The barman cleared away their empty glasses, but before Draper could call him back, Cope had his money on the bar. 'Better make it a pint,' he said, 'they'll be closing soon.'

Draper mumbled his thanks. 'It's a terrier,' he said, 'and it belongs to a nut case named Banks.'

Ernie Cope loosened the bottom button of his jacket. 'Banks,'

he repeated savouring the word as if it were being served up to him on a small square of toast. His pale face was still expressionless, but never thought Draper had he seen him buy a drink for anyone before. He settled himself against the bar, and made a mental note to tell Troy. It was the sort of thing that Troy would like to know.

'The point is,' said Troy. 'I promised I'd have the car back in the garage by midnight. I can't hang around here waiting for that mob.'

'You said nothing about it earlier on.'

'I thought I told you last night.'

'You know you didn't.'

Troy caught hold of Sally's hand. 'Look,' he said. 'If I didn't tell you I'm sorry. I meant to tell you. Honestly, I've got no reason to lie to you. I don't want to push off now, but it's a good hour's drive. We ought to get moving.' He angled his wrist so that the light from the open doorway fell on his watch. 'Work it out for yourself,' he said. 'Forty-five minutes back to town, and a good twenty minutes on top of that if I'm going to drop you off.'

'I can get a lift from someone else.'

'If you're lucky.'

'I've always managed before.'

'Of course you have,' said Troy. 'I know you can get a lift, but there's no need. I brought you and I'll take you back. It's only half an hour before they pack up anyway.'

She shrugged her shoulders, and cautiously he put his arm around her waist. His fingers crawled up her spine, and she squirmed against him. 'Nice,' he said. She was wearing the uniform of the taverns—a man's shirt, several sizes too big, over tight black jeans. Her feet were bare, and her eyes were heavy with make-up. If she blinked too hard, thought Troy, it would all flake off like soot down a chimney.

'Shall we go, then?' he asked.

'I've got to get my things.'

He patted her approvingly, and then let his hands drop. 'See you out front.'

It was working he told himself - the old Troy charm was as potent as ever. He unlocked the car door and peered at himself in the driving mirror. Across the road the band played on, the trumpet cutting sharply through the counterpoint of trombone and clarinet, and beneath everything, supporting the tune like a single massive spring, the steady elastic throb of the bass. George would be pretty narked, thought Troy. A bloody great fiddle to lug all the way back to town, and no transport. He saw Sally leave the hall and he sounded the horn.

'Over here' he called, and she broke into a trot.

He swung the door open and she slid in beside him. 'Everything all right?'

'I trod on some gravel.'

'Let me see.'

She drew her feet into his lap and he massaged them between both hands. 'That feels good,' she said.

'Sexy?'

'Not really. Just good.'

'Not even a bit sexy?'

She shook her head. 'It's what Mummy used to do after I'd been to dancing classes. It's very relaxing.'

Troy cursed silently. The presence of Mummy seemed to fill the car like a materialization at a seance. He could almost feel her breath on the back of his neck. 'Does she know you're here now?'

'Oh yes,' said Sally.

'With me?'

'I told her who was taking me.'

Troy switched on the ignition. 'It sounds like you discussed the whole programme.'

Don't be silly, they just like to know what I'm doing. There's nothing wrong with that. They're not trying to interfere, or anything. They're just taking an interest.'

For several minutes they drove in silence. The headlights of the car bleached the road ahead, and occasionally, small insects collided with the windscreen. The hum of the engine became a substitute for conversation. Both Sally and Troy listened to it, a light tenor drone which altered pitch as he changed gear.

Tentatively he touched her hand, and she did not pull it away. 'I wasn't trying to pick a fight,' he said.

'I know.'

'It's just that I don't much like the thought that people are keeping an eye on me.'

She did not look at him, but by glancing sideways he could see her face softly lit by the glow from the dashboard. 'You see,' he continued, 'I carry on pretty much on my own. I mean, I live at home but we all stay out of each other's way. Most of the time anyway. The old man's got his business, and I've got my job, and my mother plays bridge and stuff like that. Nobody asks what I'm doing.'

'Do you like that?'

'Of course I like it.'

She fiddled with the ash-tray, tapping the lid like a crash cymbal. 'It sounds a bit remote to me. Like living in a hotel, or something.'

'But you told me yourself, you don't talk to your parents much.'

She shook her head. 'I don't. Not much anyway. But you make it sound different.'

A few fat drops of rain mingled with the insects on the wind-screen, and Troy pulled in to the side of the road. Just for a few minutes, he said.

Sally did not move. 'I tell you, you had to get back on time.'

Just a few minutes.

The rain quickened drumming on the roof and bouncing off the bonnet. He switched off the headlights and stroked the smooth underside of her jaw. 'Do you know,' he said, 'there are still deer living in this forest.'

She looked through the window at the wet trunks of the trees, the bark peeling off them like strips of tin-foil. 'Around here?'

'All around here,' said Troy, his voice sinking to a storyteller's drone. 'It's all bushes and trees, and little ponds, and not a house in sight. His arm dropped gently around her shoulders, and he pulled her towards him. 'It's all wild,' he said. 'We're probably the only people for miles.' He felt for her face.

and tilted it backwards. Her lips were soft and dry, and he moistened them with his tongue. She seemed, suddenly, to relax as if the kiss had released some locking device in her joints and he gripped her more tightly. With his free hand he unbuttoned her shirt, and felt for the clip of her brassière. It popped open and he held first one breast, and then the other. The smell of her body filled the car, like steam from a ~~like~~ warm bath. It was the same sweet smell he remembered from the previous night but more intense and sharpened by the tang of sweat. His hand rested for a moment on her belly, and then moved on to her thigh. Cautiously, he felt for the tag of the zip fastener, but as the jeans began to peel open, Sally jerked upright.

He fell into her lap, bruising his hip against the steering wheel, and jamming his head against the bare flesh of her stomach. The rain hammered down and in a split second his mind recorded the combined sounds of the tattoo on the roof, his own heavy breathing and the liquid stirring beneath his left ear. He sat up and rubbed his hip. 'What did I do wrong?'

Silently she buttoned her shirt.

'Come on,' he said, 'tell me what I did wrong.'

'You take too much for granted.'

'Just that?'

'Just that,' said Sally.

'You mean Mummy wouldn't like it?'

'It's nothing to do with Mummy. I don't like it. That's what matters.'

'You were a bit late finding it out.'

She rummaged in her bag for a comb and tugged it through her hair, wincing as it caught in a knot. 'It's not a case of *me* finding it out.'

'Me then,' he said. 'What was I supposed to find out?'

She continued to comb her hair and small blue sparks traced the movement of her hand, crackling like static on a radio.

'You mean,' said Irov, 'that there are limits.'

She looked directly at him. 'That's right. You can't just grab at what you want. Not right away. It takes time.'

He switched on the headlights, and ran the motor. Raindrops

exploded like small bombs on the bonnet of the car, and the surface of the road was hidden beneath a fine spray. Unexpectedly she leaned over and patted his cheek. 'It's all right,' she said. 'I'm not angry about anything. You mustn't be either.'

'Oh no,' he said with massive irony. 'Everything's marvelous.'

He turned on to the road, sitting rigidly at the wheel. The rain slanted down like brush strokes and he drove carefully, keeping the needle below forty. Suddenly from between the shrubs that bordered the road a large brown animal bounded into the hollow of light. Troy braked sharply, and it wheeled back into the darkness.

Silly gripped his arms. 'What was it? a deer?'

'That's right,' he said. 'I told you they lived here. It wasn't just a line. He felt absurdly proud as if he had arranged the whole performance.'

'I didn't believe you,' she said. 'I thought you were just making it up.'

They smiled gratefully, congratulating each other, and Troy kissed her on the lips. 'Now you know,' he said. 'Now you know I'm to be trusted.'

Draper walked home alone. There were puddles on the pavement and already his right shoe was letting in water. He leaned against a shop-front and waggled his toes. There was a squelching sensation as if he was treading in thin mud. A good thing it was pay day tomorrow, he thought. He could nip in for a fast repair during the lunch hour, although it always cost a bit more to have it done while you waited. It also meant sitting in stockinged feet conspicuous in a corner while customers gave you the once over.

He walked on and the few remaining coins in his pocket made a meagre music. It was indecent to have to worry so much about money. It was becoming an obsession. Just lately, while watching films, he had found himself noting how often the hero left his drink unfinished and how the heroine sprang from the taxi, cramming a note into the driver's hand. No one

ever waited for change. No one was ever short of money, except in a major, dramatic way. The deficiency was always ten thousand pounds, never ten bob. He was prepared to bet that Ernie Cope was never short. Ernie was careful, and he was clever too, although trying to recall their conversation Draper could remember nothing that Ernie had actually said. His contribution was to listen intelligently, to be a good audience.

There was a new moon lying on its side in a sky washed pale by the rain. The roof tops shone as if they had been electroplated, and far beneath the road the drains gurgled as musically as a mountain stream. It was beautiful, thought Draper, too beautiful to enjoy alone. He turned right towards the church, where a phone box glowed like a tall red lantern in the shadow of some laurels. He had enough left to make a phone call and pay his fares in the morning. He dialled the number and waited. It rang eight times and then Cynthia said, 'Hello.'

'Were you asleep?' asked Draper. 'Did I wake you up?'

'I was awake,' she said. 'Who's that?'

'It's John. John Draper. I was walking home, and it's a lovely night, with a moon and everything, and I just thought you'd like to know.'

There was a short pause, and then she laughed. 'Are you drunk?'

'Not a bit.'

'Quite sure?'

'The Leith police dismisseth us.' Sister Sue's sewing shirts for soldiers. Draper transferred the receiver to his other hand. 'Absolutely sober,' he said faintly over the buzz of the line, he could hear the Mozart, and he closed his eyes to imagine the room where she sat.

'I'm glad you telephoned,' said Cynthia. 'I enjoyed the other evening.'

'So did I.' The moon was behind the church, and he ducked down so that the cross on the bell tower was outlined against its radiance. 'Have you got your curtains drawn?' he asked.

'Yes, why?'

'Just open them and look out.'

She went away for a minute and then returned. 'You're quite right,' she said, 'it's a lovely night.'

'I wanted you to see it'

He saw himself smiling foolishly in the wall mirror, and he did not care. What he was doing was childish, and romantic, and sentimental, but he felt incredibly happy. 'I thought we might go out for a meal sometime,' he said.

She hesitated. 'You don't owe me anything, you know.'

'Of course not. It's just that I'd like to see you again.'

The music stopped and he knew that the record had come to an end. 'All right,' said Cynthia, 'when do you suggest?'

'What about Saturday?'

'Saturday's fine.'

'I'll come round about half past seven.' She did not answer immediately and a small tremor of alarm quaked his chest. 'We can meet somewhere else, if you'd rather,' he said. 'I just thought it would be simpler for me to pick you up.'

He had phrased it badly, he realized, but she gave no sign of annoyance. Half past seven, she said. 'I'll be looking forward to it.'

'Good night then.'

'Good night.'

He replaced the receiver as if it was something precious. The road was quite empty and he danced to the corner, swooping from moonlight to shadow in a slow solitary waltz. Only the hall light was still burning when he reached the digs, and at the foot of the stairs he paused for a second to add another gull to the shipwreck. He was aware that he was exceeding his ration, but he felt the extravagance was justified. For once, he had something to celebrate.

5

'My dear Cynthia' the letter began. I would like you to lunch with me today if you have no previous engagement. There are matters which I feel we should discuss and perhaps an informal meeting will provide the best atmosphere in which to raise them. My secretary will telephone you at eleven o'clock to inquire whether or not you will be free to join me. It was signed Affectionately Guy.'

The tone was typical she thought assertive pompous and slightly cryptic. Guy knew the value of suspense both in private and in public. Eruptions by the TV Sage were regular events but their frequency and their cause were decided solely by Guy Afton. He played his audience by ear. He knew how important it was to keep them guessing. She folded the letter back in its envelope and sat on the edge of her bed. It was hard to guess what it was that Guy wanted from her. After three years she no longer knew the extent of his ambitions. There had been hints in the gossip columns of another woman coy references to a romance with the blonde daughter of a backwoods peer but if it was imply the question of a divorce Guy would leave his solicitors to handle it. There was something more she was quite certain. Guy Afton worked in devious ways, his wonders to perform. Even such a simple thing as a letter was part of the campaign. It was in longhand which intimated a personal approach. It was written from his club a compromise address midway between his solicitors and his home. It ended Affectionately a hint that although all passion was spent a fond residue remained.

Not that there had ever been much passion. Guy often talked of love, once he had even conducted an agony column for one of the women's magazines where he had fulminated against errant husbands and faithless wives. But that was in the past, and Cynthia herself had handled most of the replies. Guy was

not interested in love, except as one of the key words which struck a mighty public chord. He could, and did declaim about Love of Country, Love of Animals, and Love of Money (he was against it), but ordinary human love was outside his province. Although passions in varying degrees were his raw material, he was truly passionate about one thing only, and that was his career.

Possibly, thought Cynthia, that was why she had married him. What Guy had offered was a cause, not an especially good cause, but one that was sufficiently absorbing to lead her out of the lagging misery that began with David's death. The two men were in no way alike, and she had welcomed that too. It had meant a new beginning, a change that had not been for the better, but a change nevertheless.

She kept no photograph of Guy. Each week there was a fresh battery to provide her with a progress report on his ebbing hair-line and thickening jowls. And she needed no reminder of how he had looked when they first met: a short, fleshy man whose blue double-breasted suit bore signs of frequent cleaning, and whose approach had alternated between fawning courtesy and brisk bad manners. He was writing a newspaper series about Bomber Command at the time, and Cynthia was on his list as the widow of a dead hero. He had tape-recorded the interview, and a week later he had accompanied her to a fly-past at a Lincolnshire base. They dined together several times, and once he took her to see a play—a considerable gesture on his part, she came to realize—for Guy was bored by any kind of drama in which he could not play a leading part. After a month he proposed, and almost sullenly she accepted.

But it was over now, thought Cynthia. It was over and done with, and there was nothing more she had to offer. She stood up and stuffed the letter into the pocket of her dressing-gown. It was a fine day, and across the rooftops the garage flag twitched in an occasional gust of wind. There was no harm in meeting Guy for lunch. It might even be stimulating, like a parley between old antagonists. She ran the bath water and added a dash of pine essence. There was still an hour before the secretary was due to phone. She added more essence, watch-

ing the drops corkscrew and dissolve, and imagined she was walking through a forest, the sun lancing through the branches and the mat of needles soft beneath her feet. Guy had always jeered at her day dreams, not that it mattered then, and not that it mattered now. She took off her dressing gown and stepped into the green water. It was the colour of crème de menthe and Guy had laughed at her fondness for that too. It was frightening, she thought, how two lives, so briefly joined, can leave so many threads of reminiscence when they pull apart. She lay still trying not to think at all but the telephone was at her elbow, and she watched it, waiting for its ring.

'This is what I'm after,' said Draper. 'I thought it was only a couple of years back.' He carried the file over to the proof-reader's desk and read the headline aloud. 'Mother of Two Found Dead. Husband Charged with Murder.'

'He got topped,' said Mackenzie. 'They got a petition up, but he still got topped.'

'What happened to the kids?'

Mackenzie scratched his nose. 'I don't remember. Got put in a home, most likely.'

'Seems wrong, doesn't it?'

'Depends on how you look at it,' said Mackenzie. 'They couldn't go on living with a bloke that did their mother in.'

Draper turned the pages to the next heading. 'It's a point of view.'

The case ran through six weekly editions. It had been before he joined Fenning but he remembered hearing about it. There was the middle-aged husband who worked nights, the young wife, the good-looking lodger who worked days. The old triangle, thought Draper, with two kids who slightly spoiled the geometry. He wished he knew what had happened to the kids.

'You were with the *Gazette* when this happened, weren't you?' he asked Mackenzie.

'Fifteen years I've been with the *Gazette*.'

'And you know the district?'

'Born and bred here.'

Draper offered him a cigarette. 'Did you ever hear anything about this house where they lived being haunted?'

Mackenzie stared hard at the ceiling. It had been white once, but a fine film of oil exhaled by the presses next door had stained it a deep and permanent umbre. 'Haunted,' he said finally, 'you always hear stories like that.'

'But you have heard them about *this* house?'

Mackenzie studied the end of his cigarette. 'Have you talked to the neighbours?'

'There are no neighbours,' said Draper. 'It's a derelict row. They're all supposed to be coming down this year.' He was beginning to sweat slightly. The chances are that Mackenzie knew nothing, but it was hard to tell. The only certainty was that he expected to be paid for his story.

'Look,' said Draper, 'I'm not even sure that we'll use this. It's just something I want to know for myself . . .' He broke off as he felt Mackenzie staring at him with candid disbelief.

'It's not important then?'

Draper attempted a nonchalant shrug. 'Not very.'

'There was a rumour, now that I come to think of it,' said Mackenzie. 'But seeing as how it's not very important . . .'

Draper dipped into his pocket. 'Ten bob.' He watched the note disappear into Mackenzie's overall. 'Now let's have it,' he said.

There were footsteps, said Mackenzie, and screams, and there was an old meths drinker who used to camp out in one of the upstairs rooms who said he'd seen the figure of a woman. She was wearing a nightdress and her face was covered in blood. The blood was important, because it fitted in with the evidence in the court case. The husband had used an axe, and one of the coppers at the station said that it looked as though he'd tried to scalp her.

Draper swallowed hard. 'Was she pretty?'

'Not when they found her.'

'I mean before it happened.'

'It depends on what you fancy,' said Mackenzie. 'As far as I can recall she had red hair and a nice little figure. She was about nineteen.'

Draper stuffed his notebook into his pocket, and opened the door of the cubicle. He was not feeling very well. It was stuffy, and there was a strong smell of oil. When he licked his lips he could taste it, like rancid margarine. 'Thanks very much,' he said, 'that's what I wanted to know.' He went out, closing the door behind him. Mackenzie said nothing, but Draper knew that he was laughing at him; silently, of course, but uproariously.

He reached the top of the stairs and sat down. The *Gazette* was an old established paper and the presses were housed in an old building. There was wood everywhere. Fenning reckoned the whole place was a fire trap. But in a way, thought Draper, it was reassuring. Away from the machines there was the feeling of being in a barn or a stable, as if the timber had preserved a pocket of country quiet. It was all imagination though. There was nothing peaceful about the *Gazette*. It reported the news but its biggest headlines were reserved for death and human misery. He heaved himself up and looked at his hands. Both palms were coated with grime, a mixture of grit and oil which clung to his skin like graphite.

Outside in the street he spit on his handkerchief and tried to scrub the dirt away. There was soap and water next to Mackenzie's room but he had no intention of going back there. Within seconds his handkerchief was a black rag, and he threw it in the gutter. Across the street he saw Ernie Cope, and he waved to attract his attention. Cope looked up, and for a moment their eyes met. Then he looked away.

The lights at the junction changed, and a stream of traffic roared between them. Draper stood on the kerb and shouted. He saw a bus pull up on the opposite side and Cope get on. He took a seat by a side window but although Draper waved frantically, the pale face did not turn in his direction.

The bus pulled out and Draper watched it gather speed, crossing the lights as they turned to amber and tilting to the right as it swerved round a delivery van. It was almost like a getaway car, he thought, and he grinned at the idea. It was ridiculous to think of Ernie running away from anything.

Cynthia Afton regarded her husband through the small thicket of flowers on their lunch table and wondered yet again why he chose to wear a bow-tie. For one thing, he was too fat. For another, it made him look like an actor, and although a Sage could afford to look eccentric, it was almost certainly a mistake to look theatrical. People distrusted that kind of flamboyance, and it was in conflict with the image of everyone's uncle who could be stirred to wrath only by a national outrage.

Correction, she thought: by what he considered to be a national outrage. Recently the targets for Guy's indignation had been broadening. Republicans still came in for the lion's share of his fury, but the list now included fox-hunters, abolitionists, unilateralists, and shop stewards. Occasionally, one burst of spleen cancelled out another, but only isolated critics drew attention to the fact.

Guy snapped his fingers and the wine waiter came running. 'Another bottle of number twenty-three.' He beamed across at Cynthia. 'You've nothing urgent to do this afternoon, I hope. Nothing that needs concentration.'

She shook her head. 'It's delicious.'

They were eating roast beef, cut in thick red slices from the joint, and charred to a varnished blackness on the outside. Cynthia had ordered a green salad, but Guy was working his way through roast potatoes, Yorkshire pudding, and beans. She knew that he did not particularly like beef, but it was the first part of the new, bluff personality that he had consolidated, and he could not bear to dismantle it now. Beef was John Bull's food, and it was also an important prop in the public trappings of Guy Afton.

The waiter poured an inch of wine from the fresh bottle and Guy rolled it round his mouth before spitting it back into the glass. He pointed with a thick finger which quivered with indignation. 'That won't do at all. Not at all.' He grabbed the bottle and inspected the label. 'Vintage 52? I wonder. Chateau bottled? Not unless there's a chateau somewhere behind Earl's Court.' His voice had risen to the calculated bellow of his television outbursts, although it still had several decibels to go before reaching full volume.

The waiter looked hard into the glass. 'What's wrong, m'sieur?'

Afton thrust it in front of his face, so violently that some of the wine slopped over on to the cloth. 'What's wrong?' he mimicked. 'You can see what's wrong. Just use your eyes, man. There's half an inch of sediment in the bottom. It's probably the dregs of half a dozen bottles you've got hidden away in the back there. It's a disgrace.'

The waiter dabbed at the spilt wine with his napkin. 'I'll bring another bottle,' he said.

'Not from that lot,' warned Afton.

The waiter bowed from the waist. 'As you say, m'sieur.'

Guy's manners were still intolerable, though Cynthia, but they were not only tolerated, people even found them amusing. Several fellow diners were smiling in their direction. It was homage of a kind, an expression of relief that they were sitting sufficiently close to the eye of the whirlwind to escape harm.

'There was no need to shout,' she said.

'I wasn't shouting.'

'You were rude to that man, and it wasn't at all necessary.'

'I was perfectly justified to complain about the wine.'

She smiled wearily. It was all starting again, the reproaches, the denials, and the self-justification. 'Was it really as bad as all that?'

'It was undrinkable.'

'All right then. Forget I said anything.'

Guy sat back in his chair as the waiter approached with another bottle. 'This is different from the last lot,' he demanded.

'From another bin, m'sieur.'

It was all right, in fact, it was excellent. Guy insisted on shaking hands with the waiter and invited him to take a glass of wine with them. 'You see,' he said, when they were alone once more, it's like training animals. When there's something wrong you let 'em know about it. When they behave, you give them a reward.'

She pushed her plate away. The beef had grown cold, and

the pink meat was covered by a fine glaze of fat. 'That's too cynical for me,' she said.

'Nothing cynical about it.' He chewed appreciatively for a few seconds, and then drank a mouthful of wine. 'I like people,' he said, 'I like to try and understand them. We're all subject to the same wants and fears. It's just that we react differently. You don't think the waiter felt he was being hard done by?'

'Yes, I do.'

Guy shook his head emphatically. 'He was trying to get away with something. He knew that wine was off, but there was a chance that I'd accept it. When I made a fuss, he knew he'd got it coming.'

'It's too simple.'

'All truth is simple.'

'No,' she said. 'It's the sort of thing you say to a camera, and because you say it loudly, and because you're Guy Afton, you can convince ten million people. You can make any lie sound convincing.'

Really," he said. 'You really think that?' He took off his glasses and polished them. 'It's just as well that people believe me,' he said, 'because it looks very much as though I'm hoping to be an MP.'

There was a sudden burst of laughter from a party sitting by the door, and to Cynthia it sounded like the response to Guy's announcement. Truth and consequence. Down with the hammer and ring the bell. 'When?' she asked. 'And where?'

Guy replaced his glasses, and folded his hands on the table. 'There's a by-election coming up in the autumn. Our chap's retiring, and the Party want me to stand. It's a safe seat, has been for years. There's no doubt I'll get in.'

'But you've never been really interested in politics.'

'Then it's about time I was. It's a question of doing one's duty.'

He looked almost virtuous, she thought. The wine had flushed his face, and the skin shone as if it had been polished with soap and water. She was not even sure how much he believed of what he had said. To be invited to stand was a compliment, and

Guy was not averse to compliments. 'Flattery,' he had once told her in a rare moment of intimacy, 'will get you anywhere.'

'This is why you asked me to lunch?'

'This, and the pleasure of your company.'

The waiter appeared at her elbow, and she started nervously. 'I don't want anything else,' she said. 'I've had enough.'

Guy studied the menu. 'Strawberries,' he said. 'Imported, I'm sure. But just the thing.' The waiter still hesitated, and Guy handed him the menu. 'Strawberries, for two.'

'With cream, m'sieur?'

'Certainly, with cream.'

'Not for me.'

'You hear that,' said Guy, 'without cream for the lady.' He stretched across the table and patted her hand. 'I should have remembered.'

'You can forget a lot in three years.'

'You can indeed.' The virtuous look was giving ground to an expression which seemed to signify profound regret.

'Come on, Guy,' said Cynthia, 'let's have it.'

He waited until the strawberries were set in front of them, and before speaking he anointed the pyramid in his bowl with cream. 'I've never done anything about a divorce,' he said. 'We're as married now as we ever were.'

Cynthia bit into a strawberry. It was icy cold, and the juice made her mouth water. 'But you have ample grounds,' she said. 'After all, I left you. You could call it desertion.'

'Certainly I could, but what good would it do?'

'I'm not coming back, Guy,' she said.

He waved his spoon like a baton, dismissing her answer. 'Don't be too hasty. I wasn't going to suggest that we took up where we left off. I was thinking of something quite different.'

'Such as?'

'A business relationship,' he said. 'It's not essential for a Member of Parliament to have a wife. Divorce doesn't matter a damn these days, but there's no doubt the voters prefer a family man.' He dug into his strawberries and selected two of the biggest. 'All I'm asking is for you to put in an appearance,'

he said. 'It's on the record that we're married, and it would look very odd if you didn't show up.'

'Is this your idea, or the Party's?'

'They know about it,' said Guy. 'I'm not trying to pull a fast one, if that's what you mean. But it's my idea.'

She studied his eager face. 'Silly of me to ask.'

'Not at all. Perfectly sensible question. But there's more to it than that. There's the business side of it.'

She felt for her gloves, and half rose to her feet, but he waved her back. 'No, wait,' he said, 'let me tell you about it.'

'I don't think I'm interested.'

'Don't be a damn fool,' he said, 'how can you possibly tell until you've heard what I've got to say?'

'I can tell.'

He signalled for coffee and swung back to face her. 'I've turned myself into a limited company,' he said. 'I'm going into TV in a big way, and I could do with some help.' She raised her hand to protest, but he waved her aside. 'Look,' he said, 'at the moment I've got this series called "Brass Tacks". Do you ever see it?' She shook her head, but he hurried on. 'It's not important, you've seen dozens like it. One or two clever Charleys on a panel answering questions put by a lot of nits in the audience. The only difference is that we look at some of the questions in advance, and if they deal with anything interesting we put it on film.'

He drew breath while the waiter poured coffee, and then continued. 'We've got good ratings, bloody good in fact, but they're only half as good as they could be. Most of the audience look in to hear me have a go at something that gets up their noses. Something - or someone - that they haven't a hope of touching themselves. They feel I'm doing their talking for them.'

Cynthia sipped her coffee, fascinated in spite of herself. 'It's not so different from being an M.P.'

He nodded in agreement. 'The point is that the series finishes next month, and I think it's time I did something on my own.'

'What sort of thing?'

'Canning my own programmes. Inquiries, interviews, the

lot. The market's wide open. I was talking to a man from CBS the other day, and they're ready to take any amount of stuff. We've got to go for the big names. People like Montgomery, or Henry Moore. Get them involved in some kind of controversy and we're away.'

'And where do I fit in?'

'It needs organizing,' said Guy. 'It means getting a staff together, and renting offices. We'll need researchers, and cameramen.' He drank his coffee in a single gulp. 'You know exactly what's needed,' he said.

'What about money?'

'Twenty-five per cent of the gross.'

'When do you want to know?'

He packed his tobacco into his pipe, a stubby briar, which she herself had chosen to match his features. 'There's no rush,' he said. 'Take two or three days. Take a week if you like.'

'And the arrangement includes *both* jobs?'

He puffed fragrant smoke towards the roof. 'They're one and the same,' he said. 'You'll be looking after my interests.'

Cynthia shook her head doubtfully. 'I don't know. I've not seen the programme. I've not even got a set.'

'That's soon taken care of.' He made a note in his diary. 'Still at the same address?'

'The flat? Yes.'

'I'll get one sent round.' He took the pipe from his mouth, and polished the bowl against his nose. 'You can't tell me you're not interested,' he said. 'Anyone's interested in twenty-five per cent of the gross.'

Bill Brewer kicked the wastepaper basket out of his way, and perched on the edge of the desk. 'He's vanished,' he said, 'disappeared into thin bloody air. Him, and his wife, and the dog. We hung around for a couple of hours expecting someone to show up, and then this geezer from next door told us they'd gone away.'

'Gone away where?' demanded Fenning.

'Christ only knows. Someone picked them up in a car around half past nine, and that's the last anyone's seen of them.'

'He knew you were coming?'

'Of course he knew I phoned last night to check the time.' Brewer stuck a cigarette in his mouth and struck a match with shaking fingers. 'You can ask Tommy Hall. He was there with his gear. He knew what time to turn up. We all knew.' He pulled an ashtray within reach. 'By the way,' he said, 'Tommy asked me to tell you, he'll be sending in an invoice.'

'He didn't do any work.'

'No, but he was there. We'll have to drop him a couple of quid.'

Fenning threw himself violently into his chair. 'Maybe he's got a sick aunt. Maybe he got in S.O.S. or something.'

'Does that sound likely to you?'

'It's possible.'

'Anything's possible, but it doesn't make sense. I asked at the station but no one knew a thing about it. I felt an absolute berk telling them about the dog and everything.'

'What about Draper?' asked Fenning. 'Has he been round there today?'

'He called in to say he'd been to the *Gazette*,' said Doreen. 'And he collected his money, before that.'

'Where is he now?'

Doreen looked sorrowfully down at her typewriter, as if the admission had been wrung from her under threat of sudden death. 'He said he'd be a bit late. He's getting his shoes mended.'

Fenning glanced at his watch. 'It's after three. Why can't he leave them there and pick them up later?'

'It's the while you wait place,' said Doreen. 'He was wearing them.'

Brewer gave a short dense snort. 'Typical,' he said. 'Not a clue about looking after himself. He needs someone to wipe his nose for him.'

Distantly they heard the street door open and close, and then the sound of footsteps on the stairs. 'That'll be him now,' said Doreen.

There was still no light on the stairs, and Draper felt his way down cautiously. The smells were less strong at this time of day, but there was no doubt that fish had been on the menu.

for lunch. After phoning Doreen he had eaten at the pub next to the repair shop, but his timing had been all wrong. When he had finished his meal the shop had been full of office girls waiting to have their stiletto heels repaired, and he had joined the queue, tucking his feet beneath a leatherette chair while random facts on the love life of the typing pool filtered into his ears.

He knew that he was late, but Fenning's expression as he entered the office stopped him in his tracks. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'there was a queue.'

'Obviously,' said Fenning, 'but, of course, you intend to make up the time.'

'I couldn't help it.'

'I'm not interested in that. I said, you'll make up the time.'

It was the moment for revolt, realized Draper. The pettiness, and the injustice of Fenning's clock-watching made his heart thump. The correct thing for him to do would be for him to ram the wastepaper basket over Fenning's head and tell him to do the impossible with his job. But even as he considered it, the impulse died. 'I'll make up the time,' he said.

'There's another thing,' said Fenning, 'did you go round to see Mr Banks today? This morning, before half past nine?'

'I went to the *Gazette*,' said Draper, 'you wanted to know about that murder.' He took out his notebook. 'I've got it here. About the ghost too.'

Brewer shook his head. 'He wasn't there.'

'Do you think I made this up?' Draper pushed his notebook forward.

'I mean at the Banks's place. He's scarpered. There's no one there.'

'Where's he gone?'

'You tell me that and I'll give you a bonus.' Fenning spun his chair from left to right, and then back again. 'I suppose we'll have to hold the story. It's no good without pictures anyway.'

'A pity,' said Brewer. 'There's no way round it though.'

They both sighed, like partners in a double act. 'Draper can keep an eye on the place,' said Fenning. 'There's just a chance he might be back later on.'

Brewer lit another cigarette 'You know what I think,' he said.

'What?'

'I think he's been got at I think whoever picked him up this morning got on to the story He never signed that contract with us you know'

Fenning did not reply immediately and Draper began to edge his way towards the door The significance of what Brewer had said was appalling If someone *had* got at Mr Banks, there was not much doubt who it was He might be back by now,' he said, 'I'll get over there and take a look'

Brewer regarded him with cold eyes 'You've not been shooting off your big mouth to anyone I suppose?'

'Who me? Of course not' Draper worked hard to stoke up his indignation, but succeeded merely in sounding petulant 'I'll ring through as soon as I get there, he said 'I'll be as quick as I can' But there was no point in hurrying, he thought Mr Banks was not there Mr Banks was somewhere else and it was most unlikely that Ernie Cope was prepared to draw a map.

6

At midnight he rang through for the last time 'Banks isn't back yet and I've seen no one for the past hour,' he said 'They go to bed early round here'

Lenning was not impressed 'Better knock off then Get back there first thing tomorrow'

'It is tomorrow

'Look laddie' said Lenning elaborately patient we can't choose the time that we work We do the job when it comes up Have you ever heard me complain'

Often thought Draper but not for the same reason Not because you are standing in a phone box at midnight ten miles from home, with a bus going your way just once an hour All right then' he said 'I'll call you around nine'

Lenning sighed despondently and his voice seemed to struggle through layers of pain When I say first thing that's what I mean Be there by half past seven He rang off leaving Draper with the receiver still clamped to his ear and a stunned expression on his face

He turned up the collar of his raincoat and walked to the bus stop Dear mother and father he thought at this moment you are asleep in bed with the dishes washed and every door locked and bolted But spare a thought for your wandering boy Mr Lenning is a bastard Eric Cope is a thief, and I am in dead trouble A white cat minced ahead of him treading the edge of the gutter like a tightrope walker and he stooped to scratch behind its ear Animals trust me, he thought and they're supposed to know something about a man's character But I'd have given Crippen a testimonial if he'd asked me If they hadn't topped him, he added If they hadn't strung him up like the bloke who went for his wife with an axe

He stopped in mid-stride It was round here that it happened He was following the route taken by Mr Banks and

Trixie on their nightly outings. Darkness changed the whole appearance of a district, but now he recognized where he was. The new semi-d's with their golden privets and pastel front doors, were behind him. He had reached the boundary between the post war developments, and the pre war slums, terraces of bomb shattered buildings, their windows blind and their floors foul with faeces and odden plaster. When he walked on he could smell the desolation, a wet breath of decay that hung in the air like mist.

He looked for a street sign and found one stuck like a tilted eyebrow on the corner. He was in Myrtle Terrace. Further on was Rosebay Terrace leading to Iris Crescent, and after that, Campion Street. They were all named after flowers, and once flowers had grown in the small back yard plots tended by men in braces who watered their few square feet of soil on summer evenings, while children racketed in the road outside. They had all moved out though. Now they lived in Essex, or Surrey, or Hert, working in light bright factories, and coming home to light bright houses fringing the new towns. It was a good thing too, thought Draper. There was something sinister about these hulks of houses. They were not just ugly, they had been abused. And not only by bombs but by the people who had stripped them of lead and fittings, and left them gaunt and empty, waiting for the bulldozers.

There were no street lights but the moon showed occasionally between clouds. And at the junction ahead he saw the outline of a large shooting brake. It was parked by the side of the road and from the nearest house - the house, Draper realized, where the woman had been killed - came a bright steady radiance, streaming through the open doorway like a battery of candles within a rotten turnip.

He flattened himself against the wall and waited. He heard voices, and a sudden shrill barking. It stopped abruptly and at the same instant the light went out. He swained his eyes and saw the figures of three men leave the house. One of them was carrying a tripod, and what might have been a suitcase; one of them had a camera slung over his shoulder, and the third man was leading a small dog. They got into the car, and the

engine snarled into life. It set off with a jerk, and he watched it go, bumping over the littered road, its tail light jerking like a ruby on the end of a string.

Soberly, Draper blew his nose. There was no doubt as to who at least two of the men were, and he could imagine what they had been doing. The white cat weaved towards him, and he squatted down to tickle it beneath the chin. It pressed against his leg, and began to purr loudly. When he walked on, it followed, and he waved it away. 'Go on,' he said, 'bugger off. You'll get yourself killed if you come after me.' Nine lives were not enough to escape contamination from an accident prone, he thought. There were plenty of natural hazards without going out to look for them. For people as well as cats. Fenning could wait, he decided. He would learn soon enough what had happened. The only hope was that he would not also know who to blame.

At 7.30 he rang Fenning from the digs. 'No sign of Banks yet,' he said. Mrs Barrow squeezed past him with a tray loaded with packets of cereal, and he covered the mouthpiece with his hand. Mrs Barrow wore silk next to her skin, and she whistled when she walked. Billany had once estimated that she was audible at a hundred yards, the shrill rustle of her petticoats forging ahead of her like an endlessly crumbling sound barrier.

'Have you rung the bell?' asked Fenning.

'Yes, I've tried that.'

'You're sure there's no one in?'

'If there is they're either dead or stone deaf.'

It was almost enjoyable, thought Draper, or it would be if it wasn't nerve-racking too. He was one jump ahead of Fenning, and that was a good position to be in. But the gap was closing fast. 'I was just going to get some breakfast,' he said.

'All right, but keep in touch.'

'Is anyone coming over to give me a break?'

'Later on,' said Fenning, 'I'll get Troy over there before lunch.'

Then he was safe until noon, decided Draper.

He could take it easy, and still get there in good time. 'I'll call you later,' he said. 'I'll keep in touch.'

Billany joined him in the dining-room. He was always on time for his meals, ahead of time if possible. In that way he made sure of all the butter he wanted, and he was certain of a fresh pot of tea. As the meal progressed the teapot was replenished but the tea grew steadily weaker. Billany liked it strong enough for a mouse to trot on. 'You've been adding to the flock, I see,' he said, biting into a round of toast.

'What flock?'

'Don't nod on now. The ones with feathers.'

'Oh, those.' Draper looked over his shoulder in case Mrs Barrow had found some way in which to minimize her whistle. 'Just one or two,' he admitted.

'They're as thick as flies,' said Billany. 'You should let up a bit, you know. She's bound to twig soon.' He helped himself to a second piece of toast and spread it thickly with butter. Sometimes, he reminded Draper of a bricklayer, happy in his work and prodigal with the mortar.

'Don't you ever worry about putting on weight?' he asked.

Billany wiped a fleck of butter from his moustache. 'Not at all. I'd be hard put to gain an ounce in this house. He raised his teacup in a mock salute. 'And a very good morning to you, Mr Evans,' he said.

Mr Evans nodded to the room at large, and immediately retreated behind his paper. He and Draper had not met since the night in the pub, and they were both aware of a feeling of constraint. It was heightened by the portrait surrounding them. There were eyes on all sides, painted but still watchful. The guests of Mrs Barrow were under constant supervision.

Draper cleared his throat. 'I enjoyed the other evening.'

'Good, good.' Mr Evans rattled his paper in acknowledgement.

'I'm sorry you had to go off like that. I had to talk shop with that bloke.'

'I see.' The paper remained at the same height.

'He's a reporter, you know.'

'So you said.'

Billany lunged for the toast again, and irritably, Draper pushed two other racks within reach. Billany beamed his thanks. 'Do I know this fella?' he asked. 'This reporter.'

'He's a very fancy dresser,' said Mr Evans.

'Is he, indeed?'

'Wears what you call them . . . wrinkle-pickers.'

Billany nodded encouragingly. His beard was spangled with crumbs, like sequins on a mop of black nylon. 'Can't afford them myself,' he said. 'They cramp the toes.'

'But you'd wear them if you wanted to?' said Draper.

'Of course I would.' Billany raised his head sharply as Mrs Barrow arrived with the bacon. 'But I'd put in for a pair of crutches too,' he said.

Mr Evans lowered his paper and permitted himself a small, stiff smile. It was no one's game, thought Draper, but at least he had not been defeated. The bacon was properly cooked too, and – incredibly – there was a fried egg for each of them. If this was the way the day began, there was no telling how it might end. He cut into the egg with his knife and watched the yolk gush over a piece of toast. The portrait hanging opposite stared sternly down at him, but he stared defiantly back. It was not a day to call a truce. The omens were, without doubt, propitious.

Troy arrived at one o'clock, and Draper walked down the street to meet him. 'I expected you an hour ago,' he said.

'I got held up, there's another panic in the office.'

'About Banks?'

'No, that's panic number two. Fenning's had his car pinched.'

Draper felt his spirits rise like a loaf in a hot oven. 'Where from?'

'Outside the court.'

They both broke into shrieks of laughter, and three women with shopping baskets turned to stare at them until they subsided weakly against the wall.

'What's he doing about it?' gasped Draper.

'He was down at the station filling in a form, when I last saw him.'

They gloated in silence for a full minute 'Was there anything in it?' asked Draper hardly daring to press his luck

Troy nodded slowly, whetting his appetite still further 'A pair of binoculars and half a case of scotch'

There was a God in heaven thought Draper, a little unpredictable perhaps, but most certainly there He gave thanks for services rendered 'What are the chances of getting it back?'

He'll probably get the car,' said Troy, 'but he's said goodbye to the rest'

'Fifty quid's worth?'

More,' said Troy He saw the binoculars alone were worth forty'

Draper clasped his hands together and bowed his head 'I hope they get away with it he said fervently 'I hope they have the sense to flog it right away not hang around waiting to get caught'

Let's hope said Troy He glanced down the street 'Which house is it?'

Draper pointed to the telephone box 'Directly opposite The one with the blue door He debated whether he should tell the whole story to Troy and decided that it was wiser to say nothing The less everyone knew the safer it was On consideration there was no reason to suppose that Ernie Cope would broadcast the fact that he had poached the story from under Fenning's nose and still less likely that he would boast about how he had conned Draper into putting him on to it Smart operators were admired in Fleet Street, but there was honour amongst thieves, and if Cope revealed his methods he would pretty soon run out of friends It was nothing to do with ethics If the competition was cut throat no one was going to work with a man who carried an open razor

I'm off then' he said 'Enjoy yourself'

'What's the pub situation?'

'There's one further up the road' 'Iv dull'

'You going out?'

'Yes,' said Draper, 'is a matter of fact, I'm taking Cynthia out to dinner'

Troy whistled softly. 'You old ram,' he said. 'You got in there fast, didn't you '

'Not at all. It's not like that.'

'Not yet, you mean '

'That's not what I mean '

'Give it time,' said Troy, aware as he spoke that Sally had given him exactly the same advice. 'Take her to Soho,' he said, 'there's an Italian place called Alberto's. You won't go far wrong there. Very intimate and all that. Candles on the table, and a bloke going round with a fiddle '

'Did you take her there?'

'No. I didn't,' said Troy. 'I used to go there with another bird. Before your time '

Draper scribbled the name on the back of an envelope. He underlined it and put the envelope in his wallet. There were four crisp one pound notes there, and he fingered them nervously. 'Is it expensive?'

'Dirt cheap,' said Troy. 'Just don't go mad, and it won't cost you more than a couple of quid '

Everything was relative, thought Draper. Dirt cheap to you, extortionate to me. And then he remembered he had some expenses to claim. There was Mackenzie's ten bob, and even Fenning couldn't begrudge him a couple of taxis. With luck he might make enough to cover himself, and with better than average luck he might even show a profit.

He tapped Troy on the shoulder. 'I'm off then,' he said. 'Be good '

'Be careful,' said Harry Troy.

He knew it was a mistake after they arrived at Alberto's. The room was long, low, and dim. At the far end there was a small bar, and stuck all over the walls there were photographs of Alberto - a bullet-shaped man, streamlined by his tuxedo - shaking celebrities by the hand.

A waiter met them at the door. 'Have you a reservation?'

'No, but I'd like a table for two,' Draper felt the keen eyes raking over his best suit, and prying it to the nearest shilling. 'With our backs to the wall,' he added.

'Would you care for a drink while I inquire?'

Cynthia nodded. 'Let's do that.'

They sat side by side on tall stools while a cluster of waiters conferred on whether or not they rated a table. 'I should have booked in advance,' said Draper, 'I simply didn't think they'd be so full.'

'Have you been here before?'

'No,' he said, 'but it was recommended.'

She drank her sherry and made a face. 'I asked for a dry one. That was like syrup.'

Draper experienced a sinking feeling. He disliked complaining to barmen, especially in a place like this. They had the gift even while attending to your complaint of putting you in the wrong. The customer was right only, by an accident of nature, and it was a privilege that always cost money in the end. It was a dry sherry I asked for, he said ingratiatingly.

'One sweet one, dry.'

No. Two dry sherries. His voice, he was glad to discover, was reasonably firm.

The barman removed Cynthia's glass as if it contained something unspeakable and replaced it with a fresh one. 'One dry sherry,' he said flatly. He wore a white drill jacket and the name 'Dennis' was embroidered on the breast pocket.

'Will you have one yourself?' asked Draper.

Dennis aimed a savage blow at a block of ice with a small steel pick. 'Not at the moment, thank you, sir.' He wrenched the pick loose and struck again. Draper's flesh cringed in sympathy. Murder was being done before his eyes.

Cynthia tugged at his sleeve and he turned to the waiter signalling them to a table. It was in the centre of the room, and directly in the main stream of traffic from the kitchens.

'I asked for one against the wall,' he said.

'I'm sorry, sir, there are none available.'

'What about that one?'

'Reserved, sir.'

Draper clenched his fists. 'You're quite sure?'

'Certain, sir.'

He looked at Cynthia. 'Shall we take it?'

She thought of the scene that Guy would have created, and hastily said 'Yes' Instinctively, she knew that Draper was not capable of handling the situation, and she dreaded the possible consequences

They studied the menu, and as his eyes travelled over the fine print, Draper felt his wallet sagging in his pocket like a package of lead foil Ferning had come across with another two pounds but prices here were unbelievable He wondered how long it was since Troy had paid a visit, and whether in some way he was not reminding him that in this world you were entitled only to what you could afford

'To start with, sir?'

The waiter had grey hair, crimped like steel wool and his face was pleated by two vertical folds descending from each nostril like tucks in a dress 'A little smoked salmon perhaps? *Hors d'oeuvres?* Melon?'

Draper seized on the suggestion gratefully 'Melon for me'

'And for me' said Cynthia

'And to follow?'

Why did it have to be in Italian? wondered Draper He looked pleadingly towards Cynthia, but she had already put her menu down 'I just feel like something light,' she said 'An omelette, perhaps'

'Shrimp cheese mushroom, hani, or Spanish?'

'Shrimp' she said

It was no help thought Draper He had eaten no lunch and he was hungry Something more substantial was called for He scanned the double column of type, looking for a familiar landmark, but there was nothing that he could recognize 'I'll have that,' he said pointing blindly to an item on the left It was a longish item, with a lot of capital letters He hoped that the length of description indicated the size of the portion

'And to drink?'

Draper disregarded the wine list 'Meursault,' he said He was on safe ground there He could be sure he liked that

The waiter swept away to the kitchen, and almost for the first time that evening he studied Cynthia She wore a green linen dress, high at the neck, with big silver buttons running

from the base of her throat to just above her knees. Her hair was cut short and he noticed how it swooped back in crisp wings over her ears. He had the same feeling that he had experienced as a child when he had been taken to an exhibition of model aircraft. The models were made to scale out of perspex and aluminium and he remembered stroking them with his finger, marvelling at the elegance and the apparent simplicity of their lines. There was nothing arbitrary about them. Their flow and design had an inevitability that was deeply satisfying. They were practical too and that added to their beauty. They were made to work, they had a purpose. There was nothing fancy about them, nothing to distract the eye from the logic of their form.

What are you thinking? he asked.

He did not attempt to explain. 'You,' he said, 'I was just thinking how nice you looked.'

Thank you. She was touched by the warmth of his compliment.

'It was a pretty crazy thing to phone you the other night.'

I'm glad you did.'

Honestly?'

It was a sweet thing to do.

'I had this feeling of wanting to tell someone how marvellous everything was, with the moon and everything, and you were the first person I thought of. He corrected himself. You were the only person I thought of.'

At the far end of the room a violinist began to play, threading his way between the tables, ogling his captive audience. He reconnoitred his way towards them and stationed himself behind Draper's chair. For two excruciating minutes they sat unprotesting while the strains of *Come back to Sorrento* dripped over them like thin syrup, and then the music stopped.

Draper smiled dismissively at the man at his elbow, but he remained where he was, the violin tucked beneath his chin, and bow poised in one hand.

'I think,' said Cynthia, but Draper already understood. He groped in his pocket and pressed a coin into the violinist's hand. It was blackmail, he thought, money obtained under

duress The violinist bowed and smiled inquiringly at Cynthia She shook her head, and he drifted away to harass the next table

'I can't stand fiddles' said Draper 'not when they're played like that, anyway It always sounds like someone making a speech full of phoney promises and tear jerking' He pressed one hand to his heart 'Let me tell you how my mother scrubbed floors,' he intoned, 'ten hungry mouths to feed, and a drunken husband to keep in booze'

She laughed delightedly 'I know what you mean'

'You do don't you'

The moment budded and bloomed between them like a perfect flower and he caught his breath certain that he could suspend time if only he willed it hard enough The melon arrived but the magic persisted while they ate and even the waiter with the wine could not distract him Finally though the spell was broken as the main course was wheeled to the table The omelette was served first a yellow envelope bulging with pink corpses Draper surveyed it without enthusiasm, and turned to see what he had ordered for himself

The dish was covered a silver lid entombing the contents and with a flourish the waiter whipped it off Draper stared unbelievably as a dark brown porridge lumpy with meat and vegetables was ladled on to his plate Whatever name it went under at Alberton and whatever it cost he knew exactly what it was Three times a week it was served for dinner at his digs and - without any attempt at dissembling - Mrs Barrow called it stew

He noticed the television set after they had been back at the flat for half an hour 'What's this in aid of?' he asked 'I thought you were strictly Third Programme'

It doesn't belong to me, she said, it's just on loan'

'Does it work?'

'Of course it works' She turned the switch and a small snowstorm spun across the screen before dissolving into a picture of a fat man in a dinner jacket dancing with twelve girls in top hats and striped pants 'There's something I'm sup-

posed to watch later,' she said, 'I'll just turn the sound down' .

The mime continued the fat man gave way to three boys with guitars and teeth Their mouths opened and closed with idiot passion There were close ups of legs twisting in unison, and three pairs of hips rotating around three enormous belt buckles It was a fish eye view, thought Draper, with all sound shut off by a wall of water He stretched himself out on the settee and then remembering his shoes sat up again

Take them off if you like said Cynthia 'I never wear anything on my feet when I'm at home

A good idea he said Her feet were small and white, and narrow and the nails were straight He smiled his approval Most people have ugly feet'

It's wearing the wrong kind of shoes that does it'

Like winkle pickers

That's right They squash the bones out of shape'

He slipped off his shoe and crossed over to the window It's getting dark

'Would you like the light on?

No he said quickly 'Not unless you would'

I like it like this she said

They were drinking brandy out of large goblets and Draper felt the fumes swirling around each crevice within his skull It was an extraordinarily pleasant sensation a long way from being drunk Just the opposite in fact because although his body was relaxed, his mind was alert If, at that moment he was put through a test to determine his IQ he thought he would be acclaimed as a genius An impoverished genius though The restaurant bill had come to over four pounds, and he had added a scrupulous ten per cent Subtract the taxi fare back to the flat and he had about one pound left He emptied his glass and twirled it between both hands The time to worry about money was later He could always ask Fenning for a sub and if Fenning refused Troy was usually good for the odd couple of pounds

'Come and sit down' said Cynthia, 'people who walk about make me feel restless'

He obeyed her instantly, sitting beside her, but far enough away to be able to focus on her profile outlined against the dusky glow of the window

She stirred uneasily 'You're watching me.'

'With admiration'

'My God,' she said, 'you *are* drunk this time'

'Not at all, not at all. Watch me do a knees bend' He balanced in front of her with his arms outstretched and bobbed up and down until - unaccountably - he overbalanced and fell back on the settee, his legs sprawling sideways and his chest wedged against her shoulder. Neither of them made any attempt to move, until deliberately he kissed the bare skin beneath her lips

She did not pull away, but bent down to study his face. His eyes appeared to be closed and she ran her finger along the rim of one ear. Almost drowsily he put his arms round her, and their bodies slid gently down until they were lying side by side. He kissed her eyes, her mouth and then her throat. Without fumbling he undid the big silver buttons on her dress and kissed her breasts. She helped him then, slipping swiftly out of her clothes, spreading herself on the narrow cushions, and pulling him into her. At the moment of climax she called out 'David' but he did not hear. They lay locked together like survivors from a shipwreck until he propped himself up on one elbow and stared owlishly at the television screen.

He saw a short, burly man wearing a bow tie and brandishing a pipe. He appeared to be angry about something, and in silence, he thumped the table in front of him.

'Who's that?' asked Draper, not caring, but vaguely curious. 'What's his name?'

Cynthia looked briefly and then pulled him back beside her. 'His name's Guy Afton, she said. 'He's my husband.'

Waking, she thought was often the worst moment of the day the time to review the night's bad dreams and devise plans with which to fill the hour, that stretched ahead. It was the time that she felt most vulnerable certain that the world outside was entirely hostile. From where she lay she could see the reflection of the door in her pier glass and sometimes she imagined that the knob was turning imperceptibly and that on the landing there were men with hump backs carrying sciss ors and rusty knives. They were the comfortable bogeys recalled from childhood. Then they had been truly frightening (she remembered how she had lain clenched in a ball with the sheets pulled over her head) but now they were substitutes for her real fears fear of loneliness fear of abandonment fear of old age.

The last fear was premature she knew that but living alone she had thought about it too much and for too long. Draper was still asleep breathing quietly his arms folded across his chest and - careful not to wake him - she slid out of bed and faced her reflection in the glass. He had not been violent there were no bite marks or bruises on her body. She ran her fingers through her hair massaging her scalp and as she raised her arms her breasts twitched the nipples stretching into pink oblongs. She was proud of her breasts and of her slim waist, although the skin there was slightly dingy as if it had been smudged by rough fingers. That was time, she thought that was a sign of how the years mauled you committing no sudden assault, but pawing and prodding until the texture was gone. The rest of her was white, though the flesh of her belly contrasting with the black bush of hair between her legs. She reached for her dressing gown, and tied it loosely, the cord dangling like a sash.

She walked softly to the kitchen and filled a kettle. It was

not yet eight o'clock, but the sun was already hot, and the floor was warm to her bare feet. She measured out coffee and sat down to wait. Sparrows chirped on the sill and she opened the window and threw out a handful of crusts. As a child she had kept a tame jackdaw which had followed her about flitting around her head and perching on her shoulder. On her fourteenth birthday her father had given her a horse. It was a mare and she had called it Sophie. If she closed her eyes she could still imagine the reins between her fingers and the warm barrel of a body between her thighs. But Sophie was dead and whatever she decided to do now, the decision was hers alone.

She scalded the coffee and put cups and saucers on a tray. There was a carton of cream too she remembered and she put it beside the sugar bowl wiping away the beads of condensation that clung to the waxed paper. Draper was still asleep and she combed her hair and put on lipstick before kissing him gently on the forehead. She kissed him three times, nuzzling the shallow cleft between his eyebrows, and he opened his eyes, and reached up with both arms.

'No,' she said, 'you don't want the coffee to get cold.'

He sat up and she piled the pillows behind his head. Amazingly they were not shy with one another. There was no tension between them but instead a warm current of affection, like a draught of heated air that flowed calmly and comfortably across the bed.

'Black or white?' she asked.

'White please.'

'Sugar?'

'Two please.'

She handed him his coffee and sat beside him. 'Are you working today?'

'I'm on call.'

'That means you're likely to have to go in?'

Probably, said Draper, there's a bit of a panic on at the moment.

'There always is.'

'It's what we thrive on,' he said.

She had never felt so relaxed with Troy always aware that he was watching and waiting for her to reveal how much she needed his physical presence. Not for love, not even for sex, but simply as a charm against the phantoms (the ones that she was afraid to name) who clamoured wordlessly in the limbo outside her door. Despondency was something to guard against, she told herself. All lovers were cruel, and the knowledge that they were needed was like the first taste of blood. It must never happen again, not to her. This mustn't become a habit, she said. What happened last night was very nice.

Marvellous

but it can't go on like this'

'Why not?'

'Because it's all wrong,' she said. 'For one thing I'm married.'

'You told me about him. He's not important.'

He's still my husband.

But you don't love him. You've not been together for three years. Since then he thought Afyon had been cancelled out by Harry Troy. And John Draper had succeeded Troy. One body erased another. There was nothing that remained exactly as it was, no attachment that could not be broken.

Cynthia took his cup and refilled it. 'I think you should go home,' she said. 'You can call me later, but now I think you ought to go.'

He got out of bed and stood up while he drank his coffee. He was not at all self-conscious. He thought, and she took it as a warning sign. He was not denying himself, not showing off in the way that Troy had done so often, but was, too casual, too soon.

'You know where the bathroom is,' she said. 'You can have it first.'

He walked out (his back broad, his legs sturdy) and she heard running water, and then the sound of his voice, loud and tuneless. She had never known a man who sang in the bath, and she sat quietly on the edge of the bed and listened. He sang well, she thought, he sounded happy. And when she looked in the mirror she saw that she herself was smiling.

Mrs Barrow was standing at the foot of the stairs when he came in through the front door. She was staring at the picture and he felt his stomach lurch with apprehension. 'Good morning,' he said brightly, 'It's a beautiful day.'

She turned towards him, her face still troubled. 'You're too late for breakfast.'

'That's all right,' he said. 'I've had it.' Slowly, her head began to swivel back, and he gabbled on. 'I was staying with friends. We went out to dinner on the other side of London, and I missed the last tube.' It was like a military operation, he thought. How to draw the enemy's fire in one easy lesson. 'They have a house in Blackheath,' he said, 'plate-glass and potted plants everywhere. Very contemporary. You've no idea what they had to pay for it though. Cost the earth, and only a thirty-year lease at that. But I wouldn't like it at all. I'd always feel there was someone behind me, just waiting for me to clear out.'

'It's the way they do it these days,' said Mrs Barrow. 'Everything's either rented or on the HP.' It was one of her favourite themes and Draper braced himself for a five-minute monologue. He had heard it all before, but it was a small price to pay for safety, however temporary.

While she talked, he studied the picture. It was a mystery how anyone could fail to see what had happened. He could still plot with a fair degree of accuracy, where the original four gulls were but it took a practised eye to pick them out from the black horde that coiled over the wave caps like a billow of smoke. The transformation, when he recalled how the picture had looked before he made his first improvement, was startling. 'Mrs Barrow,' he said, breaking in on the story of how a landlord she knew had doubled his money within twelve months, 'have there been any telephone calls for me?'

She heaved herself over to the pad beside the telephone. 'Three,' she said, 'all from Mr Fenning. He wants you to ring him right away.'

'Did he sound upset?'

'How do you mean, upset?'

'Did he shout, or anything?'

No, he didn't shout. I'd have hung up on him if he'd been at all discourteous.'

'Of course you would,' said Draper soothingly. 'I just wondered. He's had a rather trying time. His car was stolen, you see.'

'Nice to be able to afford a car.'

'Yes, isn't it.' He stacked four pennies on the coin box, but waited until Mrs Barrow had gone before inserting them. Occasionally some of his fellow guests were forgetful, and Button B sometimes yielded a small but useful dividend. Not today, though; Billany must have been there before him.

He dialled the number and Fenning answered immediately. 'Where the hell have you been?' The time for courtesy, thought Draper, was past.

'I've just got in.'

'You're supposed to be on call.'

Draper looked at his watch. 'It's just gone ten. Nobody starts any earlier than that. Not on Sundays.'

'You start when you're needed. Have you see the papers yet?'

'No, I haven't. Which ones?' Draper leaned across the hall and plucked his sheaf from the rack.

'There's only one that concerns us,' said Fenning. 'The one with half a yard of tit on the back page.'

Charming, thought Draper. We're on form today. 'Whereabouts?' he asked.

'Centre spread.'

With difficulty, Draper flattened the paper on the floor and opened it in the middle. The left-hand page was entirely filled by a photograph of Trixie. Facing it was a smaller picture of Mr Banks, and across both pages ran a banner headline: DOES NELLIE MELBA LIVE AGAIN IN THIS DOG?

Oh God, thought Draper, Dear, suffering Christ, what am I supposed to say now? 'It's a good picture of Trixie,' he said.

'I'm not interested in whether it's a good picture. I want to know how they got it.'

Draper glanced rapidly through the text that framed the photograph of Mr Banks. Apparently it was a sort of trailer. The actual series was to begin next week, and it was to be written (a great cavity replaced his entire thorax and abdomen as he read the words) by Special Investigator Ernie Cope.

'Ernie Cope,' said Fenning, 'isn't he on the *Gazette*?'

'He was last week.'

'And weren't you round at the *Gazette* on Friday?'

'Yes, I was,' said Draper, 'I was there asking about the woman who was killed. Panic made him weak at the knees, but gradually – so gradually that he heard Fenning bellowing into the receiver at the other end – confidence surged back. He stood firm, testing his weight. He was in the clear. There was nothing to connect him with the disappearance of Mr Banks.'

'Sorry,' he said. 'We had a crossed line for a minute. I was saying that I was at the *Gazette* but Banks was already away before I got there. I never saw Ernie Cope either. The only bloke I talked to was Mackenzie.'

Mackenzie?'

'The proof reader.'

'Is he a friend of Cope's?'

I shouldn't think so. I didn't tell him about the dog, anyway.

Fenning grunted discontentedly. 'Well, how did he get on to it, then?

'It's right on his manor,' said Draper. 'I bet we weren't the first people that Banks came to. He must have chatted up half North London trying to find someone to take an interest in his dog.' He was surprised to find how easily the lies and the theories came. It was, as if the whole mechanism could be started by pressing a single button. It was a reflex action, nothing more. First panic, then self-preservation. 'There's not much point chasing it up now, is there?' he asked. 'I mean, it's ten to one they've got the series taped. Pictures and everything. There's nothing we can do about it.'

'I don't know about that. We can stir it up a bit for Mr Cope.' There was a note of relish in Fenning's voice that made Draper flinch uneasily.

'How can we do that?'

'Put in a complaint to the Editor. Raise it with the Union. He can't get away with a trick like this.'

'And what am I supposed to do? Now, I mean'

There was a flurry of wind against his ear, a signal that Fenning had lit a cigarette, and was puffing it as he spoke. 'Get back over to Banks' place, and let me know if he's come back yet. I doubt it but I want to know if he's around. Don't talk to him yourself. Just see if he's there'

'How long should I stay?'

'A couple of hours. Ask if they've heard anything at the station yet'

'Anyone relieving me?'

Fenning blew into the receiver again. 'I'll send someone. Who took over yesterday?'

'Troy did the afternoon'

'Not Troy then. He's off today' There was a rustle of paper as if Fenning was thumbing through his lists, and when he spoke again his voice was almost pleasant. 'Don't worry,' he said, 'someone'll be along'

It was the spirit of the chase, thought Draper Fenning was on to the scent of something and he was prepared to forgo the usual refinements of bullying and sarcasm while the excitement lasted. The outlook was gloomy. The omens were no longer propitious. Without much hope he went upstairs to try and borrow a pound from Billany.

The lawn had been mown to within an inch of its life, and the late afternoon sun clung to the barbered grass as if to the pile of a carpet. There were no weeds in sight. Ruthless pruning had reduced the rose bushes to rigid skeletons, and the crazy paving looked as though it had been scrubbed.

'We've always encouraged Sally to bring her friends home, but she's never seemed very keen,' said Mr Virtue.

Troy nodded in a way which he hoped was noncommittal. 'It's very good of you to ask me'

'I know we must seem very tame to you, but we're not quite the old fogeys you think.'

'I've never thought of you as an old fogey,' said Troy truthfully. He had tried hard not to think of Mr Virtue at all.

'All that we ask is that Sally lives up to her principles. That's not asking much is it?'

'Certainly not.' Unobtrusively, Troy looked round for Sally, but she was still in the house helping to prepare tea. He could imagine the sort of tea it would be: cucumber sandwiches and frigid conversation, with Mrs Virtue keeping him under close watch to make certain that he did not steal the silver. He could be wrong though. He had certainly been wrong about their appearances. In a way Mrs Virtue was like Sally, with fair, fine hair, and a clear skin. She was plump, though, and so was her husband – a short, bald man, whose scalp had the deep gloss of a piece of antique furniture. The coloration went down in several layers, as if years of devoted care had gone into enriching the patina. He was the area manager for an insurance company, and already he had inquired whether Troy was adequately covered.

The invitation to tea had been Sally's idea. At first he had balked, shying away from the possibility of involvement, but when she asked again, hinting that seeing her parents was a condition of any further meetings, he had agreed. So far, it had been painless. Mr Virtue was a Dickens lover, and Mrs Virtue liked Jane Austen. The first skirmishes had been fought on unimportant ground. They had talked about books, and plays; and journalism. The conversation had remained casual and Troy had held his own. It was the posthumous advantage of having had a monster for an English teacher, he thought. He had concentrated on the lessons instead of looking at her legs.

'Are you interested in gardening?' asked Mr Virtue.

'I don't know much about it.'

Mr Virtue stooped down to see whether a plantain had managed to struggle through the hormone-saturated soil. 'Fascinating,' he said. 'Even a place as small as this, it takes you right back to nature.'

'I can see that.' Troy looked round the garden, which was big enough – if one was pressed for space – as a compound for a

fairly slothful dachshund. There was a rockery at the far end, where concrete gnomes held apathetically on to fishing rods, and opposite there was a bird bath, on the rim of which a small boy urinated ceaselessly into a shallow pool of water.

Mr Virtue jogged his elbow 'Picked that up in Brussels. A bit naughty, some people think. But I say it's good clean fun. The original's a work of art, you know.'

'Really?'

'Oh yes, very famous. You see it on all the postcards.'

Roll on tea, thought Troy. 'I went to France last year,' he said. Drove all the way to the south and stayed at one of those camping sites.

'Did you go alone?'

'It costs too much to go alone. Four of us shared expenses.' He did not add that two members of the party had been female. It was a piece of information that he had kept from Cynthia too.

'Sally keeps talking about going to France.'

'She'd like it,' said Troy. He could just imagine her on the long, flat beach where the pine trees reached down to the water's edge, and there was a smell of crushed thyme, and the shrilling of the cicadas was a background noise that you only noticed when it stopped. He could imagine how her skin would tan, turning first to a transparent gold like a roasted chicken, and then darkening to an all-over sheath of fragile bronze which was salty to the taste. Her hair would bleach too, whitening like the driftwood they used to build their beach fires. He was prepared to bet that she wore a bikini.

Mr Virtue cleared his throat. 'We've no objection to her going, of course. But we'd like to be consulted in advance, I mean. Before anything's fixed.'

'The subject's never come up,' said Troy. 'We met down at the club.'

Mr Virtue smiled indulgently. 'There was nothing like that when I was your age. All this night life, and gadding about.' He put his hand on Troy's shoulder. 'Of course, we know there's no harm in it. Young people are much more responsible than people of my generation give them credit for.' The grip on

Troy's shoulder tightened 'Sally's a good girl,' said Mr Virtue. 'We know we can rely on her And on you'

The threat was veiled, but it was undoubtedly there 'I'm glad you think so,' said Troy He looked around for something to remark on to steer the conversation back to safe lines The concrete gnomes peered along their fishing rods and the boy on the bird bath simpered obsessively over his puddle It was naughty, thought Troy, just as Mr Virtue had said But it was not at all nice

Tea was over by six o'clock, but they continued to sit on the red brick terrace while lawn mowers churred in neighbouring gardens, and midges somersaulted like blobs of boiling milk below the leaves of the ornamental cherry I thought we might go and see a film' Troy ventured The prospect of spending the evening with Mr and Mrs Virtue filled him with deep depression

Sally lay back in her chair 'What's on?' She wore a thin sweater and white slacks and her eyes were hidden behind dark glasses

'I don't know Where'd you want to go?'

'Somewhere near'

'There's bound to be something worth seeing at the Every man'

Isn't there a musical on somewhere?'

'I don't know,' said Troy, anxious to be away 'We can drive round and see'

They don't seem to make musicals any more, Sally complained 'What'd'you think's happened to all those dancers There must be thousands of them out of work'

Mrs Virtue began to collect the cups and saucers together. 'Has Sally shown you her records' Every time we saw a film or a show she used to go out and buy the record of it She must have well over a hundred'

She sounded as though she was declaring the company's assets, thought Troy 'I'd like to see them,' he said

Sally rose to her feet 'They're in my room' An expression of slight apprehension flickered across Mrs Virtue's face, and Sally

picked up the tray before she could protest. 'I'll take him on a guided tour while I'm at it,' she said 'He's too polite to ask where anything is'

Troy followed her into the house feeling the eyes of Mr and Mrs Virtue drilling holes in his back 'I don't think they approve of me,' he said

'They're worried about your intentions'

'Strictly honourable'

'Ha!' she said

'There's not much chance to be anything else here'

She took him by the hand this way. They went upstairs, the smells of polish and lavender and discreet disinfectants advancing to meet them like a cool tide. She pointed towards a door emblazoned with a small plaque showing a handle at the end of a chain. 'There's the loo. And that's my room'

She went in and when he joined her shortly afterwards she was kneeling down surrounded by a bright litter of record sleeves. He closed the door behind him but she wagged her finger. 'Leave it open'

Why? We're not up to anything

It's what they might think that matters'

He sat on a stool beside her and stroked her head. Poor Sally

There's nothing wrong with me. She handed him a record. That's one of the first I ever bought

It was a Jelly Roll Morton LP and while she put it on the record player he studied the room. Three of the walls were white, one was pink and the ceiling was blue. There was a candlewick counterpane on the bed and around the shade on the bedside lamp frolicked a procession of white, woolly limbs

She snapped her fingers in time to the music. 'Isn't he terrific?'

'Terrific' said Troy. He felt like a rapist who had blundered, by mistake, into a nursery. The innocence of the room disarmed him. Look, he said, 'we ought to be moving'

She waited until the track came to an end, and then lifted

the needle. 'Am I presentable? Do you want me to put on a dress?'

'You're perfect as you are,' he said

She clasped both his wrists, and stood close to him so that their bodies touched. Her mouth was smiling, but her expression was grave, and he was overwhelmed by tenderness. 'Let's go,' he said. Over her shoulder he saw the lambs again, gambling nose to tail, absorbed in an endless game. He sensed danger, but even as he struggled to alert himself one half of his mind gave up the battle. It was capitulation. Already, he knew, it was too late.

'He's not back,' said Draper, 'they must have got him tucked away somewhere. The dialogue was becoming a bit repetitive. From noon until seven o'clock he had waited outside Bank's house, and – even with Fenning at the other end of the line – he made no attempt to sound anything but terse.

'All right' said Fenning 'you can knock off.

It was just as well that he had done precisely that an hour ago, thought Draper, or he would still be marooned in North London.

'What about tomorrow?'

'You'd better look in at the office. You needn't come in till midday.'

Draper replaced the receiver more gently than he had been proposing to do. There is some good even in the worst of us, he sermonized, and Basil Fenning – who not only failed to get him a relief but had not bothered to apologize – was about the worst there was.

He backed out of the phone box and glanced at the station clock. It was just after eight and by walking briskly he could be at Cynthia's flat within ten minutes. He debated whether or not he should phone, and decided against it. On the telephone he could tell him to stay away and the object of the exercise was defeated by remote control. She had sounded pretty firm when he had left that morning. But there was a silent waste of nearly twelve hours between then and now: time enough for her to have changed her mind.

There was a Sunday tempo to the streets. People were walking idly, drifting past closed shops or standing in groups by the open doorways of pubs. If he was put to sleep for an unspecified number of months and asked at the moment of awakening what day it was, he knew he would be able to tell instantly if it was Sunday. He had never discussed it with anyone, but he was sure that there were others who felt the same way. Cynthia, for example. She had that kind of awareness. They thought along the same lines. They had a lot in common. He increased his pace, dodging the loiterers, and scowling at them when they did not get out of his way.

She could tell him to go home, he knew, and she was capable of doing just that. He could not force his way in like Troy. He was not sufficiently sure of himself, not yet. There had to be an invitation, not in so many words but implicit in an action or an attitude. He ran up the stairs, two at a time, and rapped on the door. A full minute elapsed before she opened it, and he stood waiting, saying nothing while she stared into his face. There was music playing in the room behind her, and it welled out in a sweet wave of sound as she opened the door wide, and said, "Come in."

This was what they meant by happiness, decided Draper. He lay on his back, the sunlight warm on his face and stretched out his hand to make sure that Cynthia was still within reach. His eyes were shut and he felt himself sinking into a deep and comfortable trough where there was no wind and no motion, where time itself was suspended and there was no fanning no agency no worry of any kind.

Cynthia's lips brushed against his cheek and he opened one eye to see her leaning over him, the sky behind her a bright blue and one of the towers of Hampton Court framed against a puff of white cloud.

'Hungry?' he asked.

'Just friendly.'

'Me too. That's how I feel.'

They smiled at each other, and he noticed how white and regular her teeth were and how the line of her throat plunged smoothly into the deep neck of her blouse. It had been Cynthia's idea to come to Hampton Court, and although he had been doubtful at first he was glad that he had agreed. It was mid-week and there were almost no other visitors. A few yards away the river flowed beneath the trees and a family of swans swam in convoy close to the bank. He sighed deeply and narrowed his eyes against the light. 'Come here,' he said, and she stretched out beside him, her hand resting on his shoulder.

'How long ago since you were last here?'

She counted silently. 'About fifteen years.'

'You never came here with Harry?'

Never, he said. 'The last time I came I was by myself and it rained all day.'

'It ain't gonna rain no mo,' said Draper.

'Oh yes it is.'

'But not today,' he said. 'Just look at that sun.' He pointed

with his free hand, and the shadow fell across his lip like a moustache. The swans sailed by and he watched them go, their black feet churning like paddles. 'Do you like birds?' he asked.

She nodded. 'I used to live in the country.'

'Whereabouts?'

'In Sussex. We had a house near an estuary. We had all kinds of animals there.'

Must have been nice. He plucked a blade of grass and chewed the end of it.

'What about you?'

'We had a dog.'

'I meant where did you live?'

'In the Midlands,' said Draper. 'My old man was in accountancy. His firm did the books for a lot of factories. He was a bit fed up when I came down here.'

'I'm glad you did.'

'So am I,' he said. 'Very glad indeed. He thought of his father, his hair as grey as his, and the bitterness with which he received the decision to move south. You don't know what it's like up there. He said, "You put a clean shirt on in the morning, and it's filthy in a couple of hours." They've got a local opera society, and three times a year they do Messiah at the Town Hall.'

She smiled slightly at his vehemence and slid her hand inside his shirt. 'Never mind,' she said. 'You're not there now.'

It was true enough, thought Draper, but every so often he needed to be reminded of the fact. Cynthia was the best reassurance there was. She was a girl of almost of the kind of life he had always imagined. It was hard to define, but above all it meant freedom, with no one to criticize or ask questions. It meant getting drunk if he felt like it, or staying up half the night talking. It meant confidences exchanged in a dark room, and it meant lying close to someone in broad daylight. Cynthia's fingers crept across his chest, and he trapped her hand beneath his own. 'Thank you,' he said.

'For what?'

'For everything,' said Draper.

It was less than a week since they had first made love, but

already their relationship had shifted easily – and, it seemed, inevitably – into a warm channel of understanding along which they travelled independently, but side by side. They were like boats, linked by wireless, and carried by the same current. There was no talk, no thought of permanence. But there was no hint of separation, either.

‘Are you happy?’ he asked.

She hesitated for a moment, and then raised her head to kiss him on the mouth, ‘Happier than I’ve been for a long time.’

‘I’ve never been so happy,’ he said. ‘Never in my life. Fencing came in the office yesterday and asked me what I was grinning at. I couldn’t tell him. I didn’t even know I was grinning.’ He touched her hair. ‘Do you do that? I mean, do you find yourself grinning at nothing, just because you feel good.’

‘But that’s *not* nothing. Not everyone *feels* good.’

He waved his hand impatiently. ‘I know that. But most people grin about something specific. They’d think I was round the bend if I said I was grinning because I was happy. They’d want a better reason than that.’

She looked at him closely. ‘Does it bother you?’

‘Not a bit,’ said Draper. ‘Nothing bothers me now.’

They went to a concert at the Festival Hall, and they walked home along the embankment. A few yards past the R.A.F. Memorial, Draper let go of Cynthia’s hand and jumped up on the wall. There was a high tide, and small waves slapped at the brickwork beneath his feet.

Draper spread both his arms as if he was about to take off. ‘I bet I can stand on one leg.’

She swung her umbrella like a pendulum. ‘Go on then.’

‘D’you dare me?’

‘I dare you.’

He turned to face her, and cautiously raised his left leg until it was parallel with the ground. Behind him the river tugged at the tethered barges, and a passing taxi braked suddenly as the driver caught sight of him silhouetted against the lights of the South Bank.

Draper waved his hand and jumped down to the pavement.

'I had him worried for a moment,' he said. 'He thought I was going to take a dive.'

'I don't blame him.'

'Is that how it looked?'

'You know how it looked.'

He stroked his chin and glanced over the wall. 'It's pretty deep,' he said. 'What would you have done if I'd gone in?'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'Shouted for help, I suppose. I can't swim.'

'Honestly?'

'Honestly,' she said.

He sat on the parapet and flicked a dead match into the water. 'Then it might have been a bit tricky,' he said reflectively. 'I can't swim either.'

They went to St Paul's and climbed the stairs to look out over London. Towards the docks long rows of cranes dipped their heads like gaunt metal birds and to the west, smoke oozed like toothpaste from the chimneys of Battersea Power Station. The wind filled their mouths and tousled their hair, and when they embraced they both could feel it jostling them like a strangely gentle crowd at rush-hour.

Inside the dome, the silence roared in their ears and in the Listening Gallery Cynthia turned round to see Draper still at the foot of the stairs. He pointed to the wall, and when she bent her head, his lips moved and she heard his words, whispered but perfectly distinct.

She smiled at him across the gallery and he repeated the message. 'I love you,' he said again.

'I love you,' he said as they sat in the kitchen of Cynthia's flat, a jug of coffee steaming between them.

She did not reply, and he took hold of her wrist and traced the words with his finger on the soft underflask of her arm.

'Better not put it in writing,' she said. 'Rightly.'

He tweaked the sash of her dressing gown. 'But I want you to believe me.'

'I believe you.'

'You don't sound as if you do '

'I believe it's what you think you feel '

'I know what I feel '

'All right, she said 'You know what you feel

He sat back in his chair and stirred his coffee 'There's no need to humour me I'm not a child '

'I never said you were '

'Don't you want me to say I love you?'

'It's not that 'she said 'It's just that I'm superstitious'

'How do you mean?'

'Like the Chinese' Whenever something good happens to them they pretend it's a tragedy She loved with the sugar spoon, starting a small landslide in the basin So the demons won't be jealous

He threw back his head and laughed 'That's ridiculous'

'I know it is But don't say it Please don't say it

Only on Sundays

'Not even then

'When Fanning gives me a rise '

'Six months after that

I'll be old 'said Draper 'I'll be in a wheel chair You'll have to look after me

I'll do that 'she promised 'I'll look after you But who she wondered will be looking after me?'

PART THREE

1

There were asparagus tips rolled in thin slices of brown bread, looking like campers in ground sheets. There were four different kinds of sandwiches and besides them plates of meringues oozing mock cream. There was tea in fat silver plated pots and there were flowers already wilting in the heat of the overcrowded room. The windows were closed but nothing could shut out the smell of the foundries. It was an alien smell thought Cynthia as if the air had been burned and the freshness baked away. After six hours she felt the skin of her face drying like parchment the moisture being blotted from the surface. Her lips were parched and when she licked them she tasted root.

All the women wore hats. The one in the black straw boater was Mrs Cass. The other two crowding her against a bunch of gladioli were sisters. They wore tweed coats and their noses gleamed beneath a dusting of powder. They were called Binns. Cynthia smiled rigidly at them and sipped her tea.

The nice thing about Mr Aston is that he's not at all stand-offish said Mrs Cass. He understands people and he's not too proud to come and talk to them.

'Oh Guy likes people.' Across the room she saw the top of his head, the hair unruly, the hands occasionally reaching up above the congregation to emphasize a point. From a distance it looked as though he was performing an operation, the master surgeon busy with the scalpel, surrounded by faithful students. In snatches she heard his voice. Great opportunities being missed because of apathy. Trade is the life blood of the country. Too many strikes. Tackle the problem on the shop floor.

'What are your views on juvenile delinquency?' asked Mrs Cass, tapping her smartly on the wrist.

'It's a most serious problem.' One good platitude, thought

Cynthia, deserves another 'I can't believe that imprisonment is the complete answer. We need to think along more constructive lines' She hoped the tone was right, firm but progressive, forward-looking but not controversial' Guy had warned her to leave the controversy to him

Mrs Cass bobbed her head eagerly. 'You're so right Putting them in prison's no answer at all'

'I'm glad you think so'

'Quite the wrong thing to do,' said Mrs Cass 'What we ought to do is brand them On the forehead So everyone can see People are entitled to be warned who their enemies are There's no sense in mollycoddling these young thugs We've got to protect ourselves'

The black straw brim quivered with her vehemence, and the sisters murmured encouragement They had nice faces, thought Cynthia, ordinary but nice She could imagine them ordering the week end joint or filing into the family pew Guy would describe them as 'homely' deepening the first vowel so that the word evoked coal fires and warmth and brasses twinkling in the shadows It was a key word and there were key people They were members of the pack, domesticated but still fierce in their defence of property and possessions, and Guy knew the importance of winning them over to his cause

Guy knew the importance of everything He knew the value of a handshake, the moment to encourage the question, and - above all - the time to remain silent Here, thought Cynthia, he was in his element He had come to be judged certain that the verdict would be in his favour There was no doubt that he would be adopted as the official candidate, but it was important to go through the motions It was the democratic thing to do, and Guy stood firm for democracy

She excused herself and went out to the cloakroom where she repaired her make-up Through the open window she heard the throb of the foundry hammers, a steady pulse which signalled the good health of the town During a slump, Guy had told her, the hammers were idle The heart of the community stopped beating But they were beating now, and the town was

rich. That morning on the drive, she had stared incredulously at the almost militant ugliness of the streets. Every building, except the new self-service stores, and a Christian Science Reading Room – luminous with strip lighting – wore a uniform coating of black grime. Bricks and granite were anonymous beneath the same skin, and bird droppings on the face of the town hall looked like tattoo marks, punched into the stone with acid. Their car had jolted over an iron bridge, and below she had seen a canal, its surface streaked with oil, and barges, low in the water, their holds humped with anthracite.

Draper had warned her what it would be like. This was his part of the world, and she knew now why he had left it. She washed her hands – for the fifth time that day – and noticed (just as she had noticed on the four previous occasions) how a black scum ringed the bowl as the water drained away. Dirt was in the air she breathed, silting down like a long and dingy snowfall. She replaced her wedding ring – it was the first time she had worn it for three years – and went back to the reception.

It was being held in the town's biggest hotel, and Guy was footing the bill. Over sixty people had been invited, all party members, and for over a week Guy and his agent had revised the list, adding and subtracting names until all parts of the constituency were covered. There was an equal number of men and women. Their incomes varied, but few of them, she estimated, were under forty. Support for Guy had always been strongest among the middle-class, middle-aged belt of the community. Privately Guy referred to his following as 'the middle-aged spread'. Publicly, though, he was careful to address each one by name, flipping through a mental card index as he shook hands, and never getting the names wrong.

'Another cup of tea, Mrs Afton?'

'No thank you, Mr Dewar.' He had been at the station to meet them, a swarthy smiling man, in a check suit and glossy brown shoes. In the car he had sat between them, pressing against her thigh with his knee, as he pointed out local landmarks, ordering the driver to slow down to a crawl as the car

passed his own small factory. His firm made brushes ('The finest quality, Mrs Afton'), and he had insisted, in spite of her protests, on sending her samples.

'And what do you think of our town?' When he spoke, he lunged forward with his body, like a runner poised for the starter's gun.

Well, it's hard to say on such a short visit,' she temporized, 'but there's a tremendous feeling of vitality everywhere.'

He nodded briskly. That's the word. Vitality. Especially here.'

'Here?'

'In this room. These are the people with that old get-up-and-go.' He leaned forward another inch. Just the quality we need, Mrs Afton. Just the quality I think your husband's got.'

'It's very kind of you to say so.'

He waved a hand, tufted on the back with long black hairs. 'Not at all. I've spent most of my life judging men. It's one of the secrets of running a successful business. Never been wrong about anyone's character yet.'

'That's fascinating.'

'All business is fascinating. That's why we've stayed a nation of shopkeepers. It's not the money we make. We simply get absorbed in the thing. I can't leave it alone.'

He paused, waiting for Cynthia to speak, but she had exhausted her fund of small talk. The start of a headache tugged at her nerve ends and she wanted desperately to be gone. 'I've a feeling we should be thinking about our train,' she said. 'My husband always leaves it to the last minute, but we really mustn't miss it.'

'Of course not. I'll see that the car's brought round.'

He bowed from the waist (where did he learn to do that, she wondered) and strode athletically towards the door. Cynthia edged her way into the circle surrounding Guy and tugged his sleeve. He completed the sentence and then put his arm about her waist. 'I think you all know my wife.'

The faces bobbed and smiled, and her mouth stretched obediently in response. 'I'm afraid I have to take him away,' she said.

'So soon?' She recognized Mrs Cass, flanked on either side by the tweedy sisters

'We must catch the train,' she said firmly 'We must be back in London tonight'

'It seems that you've only just arrived

'I know,' said Cynthia 'But we really must go'

She laid her hand on Guy's arm, and surreptitiously pinched him through the cloth of his jacket. Earlier on he had suggested staying at the hotel overnight but she had refused. There was no sense in letting him suppose, through negligence, that she had changed her mind.

He sighed regretfully. Duty, you know. Hands shot out like spokes converging on the hub of a wheel, and he shook them one by one.

Mr Dewar strode back toward them. Every step was a spring as if his shoes were studded with small rubber balls. 'The cars waiting,' he said. He took Cynthia's arm and guided her past the remains of the meeting.

Plenty of time, he said. The traffic's not too bad at this time of day.

She smiled mechanically, squeezing the hands as Guy relinquished them, and wincing as the headache suddenly and viciously stabbed at the base of her skull.

'Anything wrong?' asked Mr Dewar.

'A slight headache.

He patted her arm. Aspirin in the car. Always carry them, just in case.

But they were difficult to swallow and on the platform, waiting for the train to pull in, she gulped them down with a glass of tonic water. It was tepid, and she belched faintly as the bubbles broke noisily in her stomach. Mr Dewar pretended not to have heard.

'We need half a dozen hotels here,' he told Guy. 'Big ones with thirty or forty bedrooms apiece. We're turning people away all the time. People who could do us a lot of good.'

Guy looked intensely serious. 'No doubt about it. I'm convinced you're right. He thumped his fist into the palm of his hand. 'Expansion. That's the word we've got to ram home.

We've got to persuade people to think big. All it needs is initiative, and a little faith. People have got to believe in their own future.'

Cynthia glanced sideways at Mr Dewar. He had the look of a man who had heard the oracle. The fact that it spoke with his own voice – with the language slightly heightened – was a coincidence that, apparently, had not occurred to him. It was a technique which Guy employed constantly. Chameleon like, he could adopt whatever idiom and attitude he chose, absorbing local colour imperceptibly until he was able to anticipate the next twist of the conversation, ready to leap in with the most appropriate phrase and reaction whenever the timing was right.

Far down the line, the train wormed into view, its head muffled in a cloud of steam. They all turned to watch it, and Cynthia felt Mr Dewar's fingers seize her arm above the elbow. She straightened her arm, and his hand fell away. This was no part of the agreement, she thought. She would speak to Guy about it. Vitality notwithstanding, Mr Dewar could learn to keep his hands to himself.

They got into a first-class carriage, and Mr Dewar dusted the seat with his handkerchief before she sat down. 'None of this when we're electrified,' he said. 'Progress all along the line, that's what we want.'

He trotted down the corridor and out on to the platform. Guy leaned out of the window and shook his hand again. 'I'm most grateful for all your help. I think everything went off smoothly.'

'Couldn't have been better.'

'We'll be in touch.'

'Very soon.' Mr Dewar stepped back, and glared inquiringly at the engine. There was a schedule, his glance implied. Efficiency meant keeping to timetable. 'Very slack, some of these people,' he said. 'No sense of urgency. None of that get-up-and-go.'

The slight jerk as the train started threw Guy off balance, and Mr Dewar ran beside the carriage, groping for a final handshake. 'Nothing to worry about,' he said. 'Everything went

splendidly. Great success You and your lady wife.' He stumbled against a heap of mail bags, and stood massaging his shins, as the train gathered speed

Guy gave a final wave and then sank back into his seat 'God,' he exclaimed, 'what a bloody bore'

'The next time you see him you can tell him to stop hand-ling me as if I was one of his brushes'

'Was that what he was doing?' Guy felt for his pipe, and then, on reflection lit a cigarette 'Would you like one?'

'Not for me.' She sat limply her body pitching from side to side as they rattled over the points

'Anything wrong? You look a bit seedy'

'Just a headache'

He gave a short amused bark 'I'm not surprised Did you have the woman in the black hat?'

'Mrs Cass?'

That's the one. Flog all the first offenders and cut the balls off sex criminals

She closed her eyes. Careful. You're speaking of the public you love?

You don't have to tell me. I know all that' He blew out a stream of smoke and watched it jerk through the window as if someone was tugging it from the other side

Guy she said how can you do it. You're not a fool. You're all sorts of things but you're not stupid. How can you tolerate these people?'

He brushed a fluke of hair from his lapel and grinned contentedly 'Means to an end my dear. No more than that. Nothing sinister about it either. You might call it mutual aid. At this moment we can assist each other. In a couple of years time everything may be different' He pulled his brief case into his lap, and unbuckled the straps. You know me better than most people, but you still underestimate me. You think I'm vain and you may be right. But there's no great glory attached to being an MP. It's what comes next that interests me, the long-term investment'

He took off his glasses and polished them with his handkerchief. Naked, his eyes were much smaller than she remem-

bered They looked tired, too 'I know precisely what I'm doing,' he said, 'but what about you? Do you know why you're in this? He settled the glasses back on his nose and opened a file marked Correspondence Give it some thought,' he said 'Just so that we know where we are'

The train slowed down before a level crossing and Cynthia glanced out over rows of back to back houses, their chimneys whiskered with aerials and beyond them to the black cones of mine tips, linked to the pit head by steel cables along which crawled a shuttle service of refuse trucks They were like rats deserting a landlocked ship she thought or ants working incessantly to raise an enormous stockpile She began to calculate how many miles a day each wagon travelled and then irritated by the pointlessness of the calculation abandoned it All business is fascinating Mr Dewar had said We simply get absorbed in the thing And it was true she realized true for Mr Dewar, and true for Guy and true for her The money was important, but it was not the main thing What was engrossing was the guesswork, and the manipulation the temptation to make the next move and to see what followed It could be called dedication but she was dedicated to nothing She was playing a game, and her proficiency was sufficient reason for playing it

When Guy had asked for her decision at the end of the first week she had not hesitated There were no loyalties to consider only she was involved The relationship was not with her husband, but with Guy Aston Limited and the company demanded not love but service In a month he had rented an office, and hired staff She had accompanied him to dinners, and edited his speeches turning down the belligerence, and injecting stray pellets of statesmanship They were courteous towards each other and there was no friction

The train lumbered on through spoiled fields where the grass was choked at the roots by slag piled in black reefs like diseased coral The tips were more frequent, meeting and merging so that the ground was carpeted with a thick layer of shale Pink willow herb bloomed between rutty lines where wagons stood empty with words chalked on their flaking sides.

Overhead, the trucks crawled against the sky. She saw one unload, its refuse spilling down the flanks of the tip, adding another fraction of an inch to its bulk.

Then there were trees, and green fields, and cattle, and the tips were left behind. She could still see them, though, ranked like pyramids around the town. They were monuments to nothing, stockpiles of waste, and suddenly uneasy she drew back in her seat until they were out of sight.

The train was due in at nine o'clock, and Draper had an hour to kill. Troy was typing a report at his desk. Fenning and the rest had gone home.

'Are you sure your watch is right?'

Draper held it out for inspection. 'Yes, I'm sure.'

'Ring up TIM and make certain.'

'She won't run away, you know.' Draper put his feet on the desk and reached for the phone. He still found it strange to see Troy worrying about punctuality. He was a changed man, and not all the changes were for the better. For one thing, the occasional beer was out because when work was done, Sally was waiting. Crumpet was no longer discussed, and that was a great blow, for Troy's observations were always noteworthy. He could no longer be relied on for the mid-week loan. And already he was hinting that he would be glad to see the return of the £5 that Draper owed him.

'What time are you supposed to be meeting her?'

'Eight-thirty.'

'Dinner with Mummy and Daddy?'

'No. If it's any of your business.'

That was another thing. Troy was becoming increasingly touchy. Certain subjects were taboo, Mummy and Daddy among them. Once, Draper had inquired how Troy fancied Mr Virtue as a father-in-law, and Troy had almost bitten his head off. He was afraid, thought Draper, afraid of finally springing the trap. The bait was delectable, but if he snapped it up he was in for life. Daily, the tension increased. There was no doubt that Troy wanted the goods, and mauling them was no longer sufficient.

He dialled the number and held the receiver at arm's-length. 'At the third stroke it will be eight ten precisely.' As always the genteel voice fascinated him.

'I wonder who she is?' he said reflectively.

'Who d'you mean?'

'This bird. The one that does the talking.' He replaced the receiver, and rested his chin on both hands. 'All alone up there in a dirty great studio, clocking off the minutes.'

'It's a record,' said Troy. 'You don't imagine they pay someone to tell the time all day.'

'It's a marvellous thought, though.'

'Bloody mad.' Troy hammered for several seconds, and then ripped out the sheet of paper. 'Finished.'

'What about a beer.'

'Haven't time.'

'Are you going my way?'

'Shouldn't think so. Not unless you're going to the club.'

Draper shrugged his shoulders, and almost tipped the chair over as he did so. 'All right, then. See you tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow.'

Troy raced up the stairs, and a minute later Draper heard his scooter tear past the grating. One more item to add to the list, he thought: a motor scooter. They were cheaper to run, said Troy, and Sally liked to ride pillion. He aimed a paper clip at the light bulb, missing it by several feet. The clip fell on the filing cabinet, and bounced to the floor. Every sound was magnified in the empty room, and moodily, Draper reached for the phone again.

The time was eight fourteen and twenty seconds. 'And what are you doing tonight, darling?' he asked.

The pips answered him, and leaving the receiver off the hook he walked into the back room. The voice, however remote, was company if he needed it, and the cost would go on to Fenning's account. It was only just, he thought. The previous week he had asked Fenning for a rise; the request and the refusal were standard fixtures in the scheme of things. Obscurely, he felt, Fenning still blamed him over the Ernie Cope business, although nothing had been proved. Cope had joined the staff of the

Sunday, and his editor had ignored Fenning's protests that the story had been poached. Mr Banks was still missing. The local dairy had received a postcard from Skegness cancelling deliveries until further notice, and the curtains were drawn tightly across the windows of the house.

He ran the cold tap and half-filled a cup. There was something wrong with the water in the office, he decided. There was always a taste of chlorine, as if somewhere beneath the rubble in the back garden there was a private tank of disinfectant, secretly installed by a well-wisher on the Water Board whose aim was to protect them from the bacteria that festered in Mr Ical's kitchen. He drank the water and made a face. What he really fancied was a beer, but it was Wednesday, and money was short. It was even shorter than usual. On Monday he had taken Cynthia to lunch, and although he had steered her on to the cheaper dishes, the bill had still come to almost a pound. Twice during the past couple of weeks he had earned something extra by supplying transcripts of evidence to solicitors in the court, but he spent every penny he earned.

The curious thing was that Cynthia seemed to have no idea of how poor he was. They did nothing extravagant, but just as with Troy, a double standard came into effect whenever the question of money arose. 'Cheap' and 'expensive' were words which had no meaning in themselves. They had to be related to the cash in hand, and in his case that was practically nil. He was in debt too, not only to Troy, but to Billy as well. He needed a new suit, new shirts, and his socks were falling apart. Now the weather was warming up, he no longer needed to wear pyjamas, but it also meant that the raincoat he used to cover up his shiny elbows and the tear in his jacket which he had mended himself, was uncomfortably hot.

He refilled the cup and then thought better of it. Cynthia would offer him a drink, and there was bound to be some food in the fridge. He returned to the front room and picked up the phone.

'At the third stroke it will be eight-fifty-five precisely,' the voice assured him.

It would take only twenty minutes to walk to the station,

but there was no point in hanging about. He was already depressed and there was nothing in the office to make him feel any more cheerful. He listened to the pips, and then replaced the receiver.

'Not tonight, you gorgeous thing,' he told the empty room. 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Vulgar,' he told himself. It was not the sort of thing that Cynthia would appreciate.

Hurrying down the platform she saw him at the barrier. His face was set in the sullen expression that he adopted – quite unconsciously – when he was worried or unhappy. She waved, but could not catch his eye.

Guy trotted behind her, his short legs trying vainly to match her rapid steps. A reception committee?

'Of one,' she said crisply.

'Do I know him?'

'No, you don't. I met him at one of Gwen Adams' parties.' She paused to allow him to catch up with her. His name's John Draper.

'He looks rather young.'

'He is rather young.' She stopped dead, and he almost collided with her, clutching at his brief-case as it slithered from his grasp.

'I merely passed a remark,' he said. 'You mustn't take it as a criticism.'

'I don't intend to.'

'Very well, then.' Guy buttoned his jacket and settled the brief-case back under his arm. 'All I ask is that it doesn't interfere with business. We don't want any gossip at this stage.'

'Mind your back, please.' A luggage trolley rolled towards them, and they stood close together while it snaked by.

'I'm simply putting in a plea for discretion,' he said, his lips brushing the lobe of her ear. 'I'm not demanding a thing. He looks a perfectly reasonable young man.'

'It's not serious,' said Cynthia.

'Then why haven't you mentioned him before this?'

'Because it's not important. It wasn't worth mentioning.' She

had never lied to Guy in all the years she had known him, and she was not sure that she could convince him now. He was not easily deceived. She had watched him conduct an interview, digging for the facts which he knew to be there until his subject was forced into the open. He was not particular about the tactics he employed either. She hoped that Draper would not attempt to kiss her when they met.

Guy nodded and walked on, an indication that he was satisfied. She beat him to the barrier and as Draper came towards her she said, 'I don't believe you've met my husband.'

He was startled but he handled it well. 'She thought smiling readily and reaching out to shake hands. 'I've often seen you,' he said. 'On the screen of course. I'm very glad to meet you in the flesh.'

'Too much of it I'm afraid.' Clearly Guy was prepared to be charming. He looked at them both benevolently. 'Would you join me in a drink?'

'I don't think . . . ' she began, but he shoofed her in front of him.

'A long journey, Mr Draper, he said, or may I call you John? A long journey gives me a throat-itch, nothing else on earth. It's probably the heating; it seems to get right inside the lining of your throat, and something long and cool is the only thing that will put it right.'

'I know the feeling,' said Draper. He was wearing his rain-coat, she noticed, and the collar was black with grease. She made a mental note to suggest that he had it cleaned.

They paused in the forecourt of the station and Guy looked restlessly from left to right as if trying to decide where to lead them. 'How about the hotel lounge?' he suggested. 'It's not a bad place. Nice and quiet in the middle of the week.'

Draper produced his smile again. 'Sounds all right.'

'Suit you, Cynthia?'

'If you like. There had been no question where they would go. Guy was known at the hotel, and the lounge was familiar ground. It was simply a question of tactics. If Guy was trying to assess a situation (and at the moment it seemed that Draper was the problem) he preferred to do it where he was most at

ease, where he knew the prevailing conditions, and could make the proper allowances for them

'After you then.' He steered them through the revolving doors and padded behind them along the corridor lined with display cases. There was thick carpeting on the floor, a blue stream that suddenly broadened into an estuary as they reached the lounge. They sat down in leather armchairs, and a waiter hurried to their table with a dish of olives, and another of pearl onions. He bowed to all three, but he concentrated on Guy.

'Good evening, sir. What would you like?'

Guy glanced at Cynthia and Draper, his eyebrows raised. 'Gin and tonic? With ice? Good.' He turned to the waiter. 'Large ones, please. For a moment he studied the table, then called the waiter back. 'And see if you can find some gherkins. Not that overgrown kind; the small ones.'

He stacked his brief-case against the side of the chair and laced his hands together in his lap. 'Well,' he said 'this is very nice.'

'Isn't it,' said Draper. He still wore his raincoat, and he undid the buttons carefully, tucking the material over his knees so that the incision in his jacket was concealed. 'Was it a good trip?' he asked.

Guy paused his lips judiciously. 'I think so.'

'John comes from that part of the world,' said Cynthia. 'He probably knows some of the people we met today.'

'Really?' Guy brought out his pipe, and stroked the bowl between his finger and thumb. 'Which of the people?'

'Just mention a few names,' said Draper. 'I suppose Dewar was there.'

'He was.'

'And Mrs Cass?'

'Mmm.' Guy squinted through a cloud of smoke, and blew out the match. 'You know what we were doing up there, then?'

'Well ...' Draper flushed with embarrassment. Cynthia did mention that you were going to meet some of the nobs.'

'The nobs?'

'The local big-wigs. There's only about a dozen that count. It's easy to guess which ones you were interested in.'

The waiter arrived with the drinks, and Guy slid a note on to his tray. It was a five pound note, observed Draper. He tried to guess how much change there would be, and what Afton would consider the proper tip.

'Cheers,' he said, raising his glass. 'Lots of luck and all that.'

'Do you think I'll need it?'

'I shouldn't think so. You've got nothing to worry about.'

He leaned forward to put his glass down, and as he did so his raincoat parted. He pulled it back over his knees, but not soon enough. He was sure that Guy had seen the mend in his jacket.

'John's a journalist,' said Cynthia.

'Which paper?'

Defensively, Draper reached for his glass again. 'I work for an agency.'

'Reuters? Exel?'

'Neither. It's just a small one. Fenning's. Features Basil Fenning's the boss.'

'Do you like it?'

'Not much. It's a bit of a dead end.'

'Why stay then?'

Draper spread his hand, and a drop from his glass spilled on to the carpet. 'I'm supposed to be learning. I don't know where I'd go to.'

'Are you any good?'

He felt the stream of interrogations pinning him piece by piece against the chair. He knew he was competent. There's not much chance to find out with Fenning.

Guy emptied his glass, and automatically Draper followed suit. The same again. He nodded, and a second later panicked. Even without inspecting his wallet he knew for certain that he did not have enough money to pay for the round. He considered staging a faint, or announcing that he'd left it all, but Afton – he knew – would not be fooled.

He crossed his legs, thankful at least that his shoes had been mended. 'I'm always on the look-out,' he said. 'The trouble is I got fed up with applying for jobs, and being turned down for

lack of experience I must have been for at least twenty interviews but nothing's ever happened'

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the waiter approaching, and as the fresh drinks appeared on the table he reached slowly for his wallet. Afton waited until it was half-way out of his pocket, then signalled to him to put it back.

'On me' he said 'I insist'. He nodded genially over the rim of his glass and as the waiter turned to go tugged at the seam of his trousers. 'Gherkins' he said. 'The small ones.'

There would be no scene tonight, thought Cynthia. Guy was intent on creating quite a different impression. He was being perceptive, amiable and tolerant. Sometimes he reminded her of one of those revolving globes that hung on the ceiling, of ballrooms. The surface was a mosaic of small mirrors, each one set at a slightly different angle so that the reflected image was fragmentary. But it was not meant to throw back a complete image. It turned slowly in the beam of a spotlight scattering slices of radiance around the room like soapflakes. The patterns were controlled by the number of light and where they were placed. But the design was always partial, always selective. And so it was with Guy. He showed himself in part only, always choosing in what light he should be seen.

'How long have you lived in London?' he asked.

Draper fished the slice of lemon from his drink and nibbled the rind. A couple of years.

Did you have any trouble finding a flat?

'None at all'. The oil burned his tongue and he topped up the glass with tonic water before taking another drink. 'I live in digs,' he said.

Suddenly he tired of the cross-examination. In less than fifteen minutes Afton had discovered that Cynthia confided in him, that he was short of money, that he was probably too dim to find a decent job, and that he lived under the thumb of a landlady, although why he should find the information interesting it was difficult to understand.

Cynthia pulled on her gloves, smoothing the fabric over each finger. 'I think we should be moving.'

She stood up at the same time that the waiter brought the

gherkins. He stood there undecided, while Guy finished his drink, and picked up his brief case. He looked at Draper, who shook his head, and then at the dish in his hand.

'The gherkins, sir,' he said. 'The small ones.'

Guy settled the brief case under his arm. 'Yes, those are the ones.'

'You asked for them, sir.'

'I believe I did fifteen minutes ago.'

'But, sir, we had to open a bottle.'

Guy patted him lightly on the shoulder. 'I understand.' He knocked out his pipe in the ash tray, and turned to Cynthia. 'Can I offer you a lift?'

'We go in opposite directions.'

'Of course we do.' He turned to Draper. 'What about you?'

'I'm seeing Cynthia home.'

Guy tucked the pipe back into his pocket. His face was flushed, but his expression was amused. It was almost as if he was enjoying some private joke. 'Well, I hope we meet again soon. Let's walk as far as the airport.'

He led the way from the counter without a backward glance at the waiter who still stood by the table, the dish of gherkins held waist-high like an offertory plate. But Guy had made no donation, thought Cynthia. The waiter had not been tipped. It was not forgetfulness, she was certain of that. The omission had been deliberate. She was half-way, through the revolving door when she understood, and she smiled gently, much as Guy had done, because the lesson was a simple one. Guy paid for services promptly rendered. Excuse did not interest him. He expected to be supplied with what he wanted, when he wanted it.

The door spun round, and she heard Draper follow her across the pavement. She was not wholly sure why her husband had thought the lesson necessary. But he was, of no doubt about one thing, it was addressed to them all.

In the taxi she said nothing, but leaned against him, her hair prickling his cheek, her hand resting on his thigh. He poked

back her glove, and drew his finger across the skin of her wrist, but she did not respond.

'Tired?'

'It's been a long day.'

He stared at the passing shop fronts, jumpy with neon signs, and garish with Hire Purchase posters. 'He's not so bad. Not when you talk to him.'

'I suppose not.'

'He's sharp, though I got browned off with all those questions.'

She straightened her glove and sat upright. 'Guy's a great believer in finding out what he can.'

'I didn't say anything wrong? Nothing serious, I mean.'

'I don't know. Guy just collects information. Some of it's useful, some of it isn't. It depends what he finds to do with it.'

Her voice was matter-of-fact, but he was alarmed. 'He's not got it in for you? Or me?'

'Not as far as I know.'

'You would know if he had, wouldn't you?'

She patted his hand reassuringly. 'I expect so.' She leaned back again, and the headlights of a passing car flickered across her face, stamping it briefly on his mind's eye. It was so unexpected, and so vivid that he thought 'That is how I shall remember her five years from now.'

'What do you think of the place?' he asked. 'Was it any better than I told you?'

'Worse, if anything.'

'And what about old Dewar. Did you have to warn him off?'

'What do you know about it?'

Draper chuckled reminiscently. 'Everybody knows about Dewar. He's supposed to take pills. He can't keep a secretary for more than six months. There was a row about one girl just before I left home, but they hushed it up.'

'Is it as funny as all that?'

'It is if you know Dewar.'

'I don't want to know Dewar.'

'All right then,' he said soothingly. 'But it looks as though you'll have to. He's a big man up there.'

The taxi pulled up outside the flat and Draper stepped out on to the pavement. 'Careful,' he said as he took her arm, 'he's right by the grating. You don't want to get your heel caught.'

He paid the driver and followed her in to the hall, but at the foot of the stairs she stopped and put her hand on his chest. 'Not tonight,' she said. 'I've got a splitting head. I just want to go straight to bed.'

'That's all right with me.'

'To sleep.'

'But it's early,' he said. 'You have a bath while I get you something to eat. He touched her lightly on the side of the neck. Doesn't that sound like a good idea?'

Not tonight. She ran quickly up the stairs and called down from the landing. 'Phone me tomorrow.' Then her door opened and closed, and the time switch clicked off and he was alone in the dark.

He stood there for a minute listening to the house shift on its timbers, small sound that had been going on for fifty years, and would continue until they pulled the building down. The walls were tired and he pressed his forehead against the cool glaze. He was hungry and he was bewildered. After paying the taxi fare he had less than ten shillings to last him until Friday, and then he had to face Troy and Billany. Their mother and father, he thought, the love of money may be the root of all evil, but how much if you can what else to love this troubled night. He stepped out on to the pavement and started walking.

2

He had arrived late at the court, and now the jailer was waiting to take back the charge sheets. 'Hang on,' he said, scribbling down the details, 'I'll be through in a couple of minutes.'

'You'll have to get them later.'

'Just a couple of minutes.'

'They're wanted now.'

Draper flipped through the pile, trying to absorb at a glance whether anything interesting was likely to turn up. There was always a panic if he arrived late. Looking at the charge sheets in advance was a concession, negotiated by Fenning when he had taken over reporting at the court. It was unofficial, but it was paid for by surreptitious but steady gifts of scotch and cigarettes to the jailer's office. Not everyone received the same amount of loot. There was a scale of payments, just as in any other business. But the jailer himself did very well. He had no right to turn awkward now.

He pushed the sheets along the top of the press box, and stuffed his notebook into his pocket. 'Take long, d'you think?'

'Not the charges. The remands may go on a bit. There's that suspected persons. They've got three counsel between them.'

Draper groaned and eased his way out of the box. The mills of God ground slow, he thought, but they were jet propelled compared with the speed of proceedings in this court. He had time for a cup of tea while the applications for summonses were heard; then there were the drunks; then came the only real meat of the day. At a rough estimate he had half an hour before things became interesting.

In the entrance hall there was a small queue outside the door to the public gallery, and several women were sitting outside the probation officers' department. One of them with a baby in her lap had a black eye. It was a hard life, he thought, when you had to go to a total stranger for help and complain about

your old man. Of course, the probation officers were good listeners. They were unshockable too, and they needed to be. When he had first joined the agency, Fenning had made him sit through session after session of the matrimonial court, reporting the cases not for publication, but for practice. He could still remember how he had dreaded those Thursday afternoons and how he had sat, unable to watch, as the witness stumbled through a recital of quarrels and indignities, all of which spelled the ruin of a marriage. It was remarkable how many probation officers were still prepared to risk marriage themselves. At least, they knew the snags they were likely to encounter. But he still found it hard to understand how anyone could listen to such a catalogue of appalling cruelty, and perversion, and neglect without absorbing a percentage of the misery. It was unnatural, he thought, although the training probably helped. If blankets could be moth-proofed, why not some kind of prophylactic for probation officers? Pills to be taken before meals: one a day to keep the anguish away. Large economy size reserved for employees of Fenning's Features.

'Got a moment?'

'Yes, what is it?'

'I just want a word with you.' It was Detective Sergeant Fuller, his jaw gleaming from the razor, a small square of tissue paper marking the spot where the blade had nicked his throat.

Draper felt a pang of unease 'Yes?'

'Is there somewhere private?'

'Not here.' He glanced round the entrance hall. 'There's only the bog.'

'That'll do.' Sergeant Fuller pushed the door open, and when Draper was inside, stood with his back pressed against it.

There was a reek of urine and carbolic, and trapped against the dull glass roof, a single fly buzzed in a tangle of old cobwebs. 'What's it all about?' asked Draper.

Sergeant Fuller took a paper bag from his pocket, and offered it to him. 'Have a sweet.'

'No thanks.' He found it difficult to swallow, and he started nervously when there was a gush of water in the stall behind him.

'Have you seen the charge sheets yet?'

'Not all of them. I was late getting here.'

Sergeant Fuller rolled the sweet from one side of his mouth to the other, and as he licked his lips, Draper caught a whiff of aniseed. 'There's a friend of yours up today.'

'Who's that?'

'You remember him. Bernard Swan. The bloke who had the break-in a few weeks back.'

Fascinated, Draper watched the scrap of tissue paper bob up and down as Sergeant Fuller spoke. 'What's the charge?'

'Receiving,' said Sergeant Fuller. 'Someone flogged him half a ton of veneer that came from a shop at Old Street. We turned it up while we were over there on the wages job. He's going to plead.'

'Very wise.'

'He's very worried about it, though.'

'So he's worried. Why tell me about it? You nicked him.'

Sergeant Fuller braced himself more firmly against the door. 'He's worried about it being reported. He asked me to see if I could arrange for it to be kept out of the papers.'

'I see.' Three locals, two trade, and maybe a paragraph for the evenings, thought Draper. 'It can't be done,' he said.

'He doesn't want you to be out of pocket.'

Draper shook his head. 'It's Fenning that'd be out of pocket, not me. I can't go round and tell him that I've skipped a case because Mr Bernard Swan doesn't want his name in the papers.'

'It's nothing to do with Fenning.'

'I work for him.'

'But he's not here. You're the one who'll be sitting in court.'

The fly buzzed frantically above their heads, and Draper winced at the frenzied piping. 'It's too risky,' he said.

Sergeant Fuller reached into his hip pocket. 'It's worth twenty-five quid.'

'I can't do it.'

'Fifty then.' Sergeant Fuller unfolded a wad of notes and slowly counted out ten fives. 'That's the limit,' he said. 'Fifty for you and fifty for me.'

Except that you were going to split it rather differently, thought Draper 'I can't tell you now,' he said

'Why not?'

'Someone else from the office might be in court when the case comes on. You'll have to wait till it's over.'

His hands were greasy with sweat and he wiped them on his handkerchief. It's the only way, he said. I'm not taking any chances for your Mr Swan.

Sergeant Fuller put the notes back in his hip pocket and pulled his jacket straight. Fair enough, he said, but let's be clear about one thing. It's not for Mr Swan. It's for fifty quid.'

The offices of Guy Afton Limited were on the fourth floor of a new block behind University College. Without moving from her desk Cynthia could see the stone lions crouched by the north door of the museum and rectangles of roof tops where the tall terraces of Bloomsbury bent sharply into squares. At first Guy had suggested taking premises in one of the squares. The company's address, he had felt, would be dignified, but Cynthia had talked him out of it.

The Afton image, he had pointed out, was tough and aggressive. There was no chance of mixing it with false associations. What they were selling – and selling hard – was an article that was as functional as a spin drier. They were hucksters whose merchandise was fact, so what she said was the point of disguising it? Guy had agreed, accepting the argument, and trusting her in time. For a man who was suspicious about most things, he trusted her to a remarkable degree, she thought. And then corrected herself. Guy trusted her when their interests were identical. When they diverged he accepted nothing until he was certain that his profit was secure.

She had chosen the furniture, the fittings and letter heads. She had interviewed over forty girls before engaging a secretary and a copy typist. Later she would hire researchers and a camera unit. Guy had given blanket approval to all her decisions. It was only now, since his meeting with John Draper, that she felt the faintest tremor of uncertainty, like finding a loose board in what she had believed to be a solid floor.

'Could you come through for a minute,' Guy called from the next room. Their offices were separated by a thin partition, and except for when he was making long-distance telephone calls, the door was always open. They were relaxed as they had never been during the years they had lived together, but there was no intimacy. She had made sure of that.

'Wait there,' said Guy as she came through the door. His back was turned towards her, and with a flourish he spun round to reveal a card framed against his chest.

She read the words printed in block capitals: 'Afton asks why.'

'Do you like it?'

'Fine.' She folded her arms and leaned against the book-case. 'I think it's exactly right.'

He beamed delightedly. 'It came to me last night. At three o'clock this morning to be precise. All of a sudden I was awake and the title was there.'

'In letters of fire?'

'Not at all. He laid the card carefully on his desk. 'It was just a thought. Nothing more. But I've noticed before how these things come in a flash, long after you've stopped worrying about them.'

He really was pleased with himself, thought Cynthia, as if a title for the series solved all their problems. And in a way it did, certainly as far as Guy was concerned. His fingers traced the lettering, spelling out the words, and she knew that behind the contented contours of his face his brain was making a series of imaginative leaps vaulting from content to format dawdling for a second on celebrity status, but never losing sight of the central theme - Afton, the hero, the man of the people, the man who asks why.

'There's a list of subjects we ought to go through,' she said.

He relinquished the card, and then, as an afterthought, propped it against his ash-tray. 'Very well, whenever you like.'

'It's only tentative, but if we want to start shooting next month we'll have to work out some budgets.' She went into her own office to find the file, and called over her shoulder. 'We'll have to think about a director too.'

'Do we need one?'

Cynthia sat down in a wing-backed chair. 'Of course we need one. You can't be on both sides of the camera at the same time.'

'I suppose not.' His fingers strayed back to the card, and intuitively she knew what he was thinking. The director's name would go on the credits. The glory would have to be shared.

'I'll see who's available,' she said. 'It needn't cost too much, but we don't want any old hack. He's got to have some ideas of his own.'

'We supply the ideas.'

'They've got to be interpreted.'

He nodded sulkily. 'All right, then. We'll come back to that later. What were the subjects we put down?'

She handed him a carbon copy of the list. The headings were brief and there were large, blank spaces for pencilled additions. 'To start with,' she said, 'there's Morals. We can probably get a couple of programmes out of that. Teenage Petting. Rise in Illegitimacy. Fall in Church Attendance.' She looked up at him and tapped her pencil against her teeth. 'Any comments?'

He seemed to be lost in thought, his eyes fixed blankly on a spot half-way up the opposite wall. Then, slowly, he focused on the card propped in front of him. 'Afton Asks Why,' he said loudly. 'Why Has Britain Abandoned Her Moral Standards? Why Are Our Churches Empty? Why Is There a Boom In Fatherless Babies? Why Have Our Teenagers Turned To Free Love?' He paused to stroke his plump cheeks. 'I like that,' he said. 'It has the right ring about it.'

Cynthia pencilled a large tick against the top of the list. 'Then there's the Monarchy,' she said. 'Very much your subject.'

'Good for America, too.'

She nodded briefly and ran her pencil down the headings. 'Critics of the Crown. Function of Monarchy. Cost of Maintaining It. Reasons Against.'

The reaction was immediate. 'Why Can't The Queen Answer Back? Why Do We Waste Our Royal Talent? Why Should We Want A Cut-Price Constitution? Why Should We Make A Change For The Worse?'

Cynthia pencilled another tick, larger and blacker than the first 'Of course,' she said, 'we can't advertise the programmes like that'

'I don't see why not'

'Don't you really?'

He subsided for a moment, but within seconds his face brightened 'We don't need to,' he said 'When people see the name of Alton, they know what to expect.'

'You think so?'

'I've got letters to prove it Thousands of them Of course they know what to expect, and I've never let them down yet'

Cynthia embroidered the second tick with a frilly border. 'Maybe you're right,' she said After all, she thought, Guy was usually right in his forecasts But not entirely everybody knew what to expect from Guy Alton Not all of the people, and certainly, not all of the time

The hands of the clock pointed to eleven and Troy was due to relieve him at eleven thirty Budleigh had loitered over the list making a meal out of a case of insulting words and sounding off for five minutes at one of the local toms who was supposed to have harked the constable who arrested her on the shin Budleigh had asked to see the damage, and there had been a short interlude while the copper rolled up his trouser leg, and proffered his shin for the court's inspection From the press box it had been impossible to see the bruise but Budleigh had been impressed and the tom had gone down for a month. Bernard Swan's chances, thought Draper, were pretty slim

'Number ten on your list, sir,' said the jailer 'Eileen Frost.'

The door to the cells swung open and a small crumpled woman, wearing a shabby coat, was ushered into the dock. Her face was deeply lined, and her hair was stiff with dirt She dabbed at her lips with a grimy handkerchief, and the movement released a strong smell of unwashed flesh, mixed with a stale gust of something vaguely chemical Draper's nose wrinkled in recognition There was no mistaking the smell of a meths drinker

The clerk shuffled the charge sheets and cleared his throat.

'Eileen Frost,' he said, 'you are charged with causing wilful and malicious damage to the value of fifteen pounds by breaking the window of a café at 145 Upper Street, the property of Herbert Hollister. How do you plead? Guilty or Not Guilty?'

The woman in the dock mumbled something unintelligible, and the jailer cocked his head forward. 'Tell me,' he said. The mumble was repeated and the jailer jerked his attention. 'The defendant wishes to enter a plea of Guilty, sir.'

Draper dug his pencil into the desk top so violently that the point snapped off. It was the jailer's day, he thought, and he was making the most of it. He had been a Warrant Officer during the war ('One of nature's N.C.O.'s' was how Troy described him), and his uniform was daubed with campaign ribbons. His hair was cut short and heavily greased, and the line from the rim of his collar to the top of his head was perfectly straight. Men with right-angled skulls were not to be trusted, Draper reminded himself. It was a warning that should be carved into the top of the press box for the benefit of his successors.

'Facts?' snapped Budleigh.

An inspector stepped into the witness box. 'Your Worship,' he said, 'last night at 10.15 p.m. I was called to a disturbance at Mr Hollister's café, where I saw the defendant standing on the pavement waving a sauce bottle. I made inquiries and ascertained that she had been ejected by Mr Hollister when other customers objected to the smell of her person. I asked her to go away and she refused. When I asked her a second time she said "You bastard" and threw the bottle at the window.' He glanced at his notebook. 'The window was smashed,' he added.

'Anything known?'

Draper saw Sergeant Fuller slip stealthily into court, and sit down behind the dock. Unless Budleigh got a move on it was fifty quid up the spout, for them both. It was the first time, he thought. He had been approached many times before, but it was the first time he had ever seriously considered accepting a bribe. There was a risk involved, of course, but it had never been because of the risk that he had refused on all the other

occasions Ethically, it was all wrong, he was not kidding himself about that, even now But never before in his entire life had he ever wanted – no, *needed* – money so desperately It was necessary for his self respect He was beginning to *think* like a pauper, and it was degrading

‘Twelve previous convictions,’ said the jailer. ‘All for drunkenness’ He stepped forward to the edge of the solicitors’ pen ‘I know this woman, Your Worship She’s received considerable help from the officers of this court, including the probation staff But she’s quite incorrigible’

Budleigh nodded and jotted a note on his blotter. ‘Anything to say?’

The woman in the dock seemed not to hear him Her head was stooped and – incongruous in the matted hair – Draper noticed a pink plastic bow

‘Any money found on her when she was arrested?’

The jailer clicked his heels One and sixpence ha penny sir’

No chance of raising any, I suppose?’

‘No chance at all, sir’

‘Very well then Fourteen days’

The time was ten minutes past eleven and as Bernard Swan stepped into the dock Sergeant Fuller walked briskly round to the witness box He stood with his back to the wall, facing Draper across the well of the court His expression was one of complete disinterest, but as he straightened his tie his hand – with the thumb and four fingers extended – momentarily masked the white tie of his shirt before sliding down the lapel of his jacket

Bernard Swan pleaded Guilty His firm, said Sergeant Fuller, suffered a serious blow when the premises were broken into, and the wages stolen Foolishly as he would be the first to admit the defendant had attempted to balance his losses in a small way by purchasing stolen property But he had no doubt that it was an isolated offence Swan was a man of good character and in the past he had been of considerable assistance to the police

Automatically, Draper took down the statement. It was so

smooth, it was practically homogenized. Bernard Swan was an innocent who had been led astray. There was no mention of the fact that the theft of the wages was covered by insurance, no hint that he had bought the winner *before* the break-in. There was not much doubt either that Swan had been briefed as to how he should sit in the dock, his head in his hands, his whole body bent forward as if weighed down by remorse.

'Is this man represented?' asked Budleigh.

Sergeant Fuller kept his voice decently low. 'No, sir.'

Another piece of stagecraft thought Draper. Another triumph for the fine Metropolitan hand of Sergeant Fuller. Employing a solicitor would do Swan no positive harm, but doing *without* one was an immediate stroke in his favour. To Budleigh it would signify not only corruption but also trust in the judgement of the court. Fifty quid was a small investment for advice like that.

'Do you wish to say anything to the Magistrate?'

It was the cue for which Bernard Swan had been waiting and his performance bore the stamp of the master. He rose slowly to his feet, his head tilted down. Then, with an effort that seemed little short of heroic, he forced himself to look Budleigh in the eye. 'Only that I'm sorry, your Honour, he's whispered brokenly.

It was a walkover, thought Draper, a perfect example of how to win without trying. The room filled with sympathy, he could feel it pulsing through the air and congealing on the figure in the dock.

Budleigh unfurled his fountain pen and made an entry in the register. He was a small man, completely dwarfed by his red leather chair, but beneath his sober exterior lurked a high sense of drama. This was his moment and he relished it in silence. Sometimes he made speeches, and frequently he was sarcastic, but today the swelling mood of his audience was irresistible.

Bernard Swan, he said finally, 'I am persuaded that you have learned your lesson. It is unnecessary for me to point out the stupidity of your action. I believe you know already the grave risk you ran here this morning.' He blotted the regis-

ter and screwed the cap back on his pen 'You will be conditionally discharged, and you will pay twenty-five guineas costs,' he said

Bernard Swan sagged the requisite six inches to demonstrate his relief and from all parts of the court came a light murmur of approval It was interesting, thought Draper, how happiness always had the same sound rather like the croon of a dynamo, or the castrato hum of telegraph wires Anger could be transcribed too, and disgust, but the sounds they produced belonged to the lower register Budleigh had heard the full range, and no doubt he too had learned to identify them Peering over his glasses he acknowledged Draper's slight bow as he left the press box and crossed the back of the court Normally, he used the jailer's door, but Troy was due at any minute and this was a short cut

Sergeant Fuller was waiting in the entrance hall He smiled broadly, and scrubbed his hands together the impression enjoying his success 'All right, then? No snags? He gestured towards his hip pocket

Not here said Draper 'In the bag'

The fly was still trapped against the roof but its buzzing was much fainter 'Fifty' quid said Sergeant Fuller He counted out the notes and folded them in Draper's hand 'I can tell them it's all fixed'

'You can tell them, said Draper

'That's fine then' Sergeant Fuller paused with his hand on the door knob 'I'd better go out first We don't want to make it look as if we've been having a party'

He left immediately, and Draper counted up to twenty before he followed Across the hall he saw Bernard Swan surrounded by a group of people all of them laughing and slapping each other on the back Apart from them, sitting alone with his cap between his hands, was old Swan, and without thinking, Draper walked towards him

His heels chimed on the tiled floor and when he was half-way across the hall, old Swan looked up He saw Draper (he was certain of that), but he looked beyond him His eyes were blue, like those of a child, and his skin was crumpled like tissue

paper. Always before they had enjoyed their gossip but now, Draper realized, they had nothing to say to each other. He turned abruptly and went back into court.

Cynthia was out when he phoned, but, at least, Billany was glad to see his money back. 'Join me in a jar, to celebrate,' he said.

They went to an Irish House and drank draught Guinness, and the froth clung to Billany's moustache like cream. 'It's good for the muscles, this stuff,' he told Draper.

'Who needs muscles?'

'I do. For the weights.'

Over his bed, Billany had a framed photograph showing him in leopard skin briefs, with an apparatus that looked like a pair of locomotive wheels poised above his head.

'But what d'you get out of it? I mean, d'you do it for fun?'

Billany threw back his head and laughed. His lips wet and red against his beard. 'Certainly I do it for fun.' He flexed the muscles of his right arm. 'Here, feel that. Go on, give it a good squeeze.'

Gingerly, Draper did as he was told. Beneath the blue barathea of Billany's jacket there seemed to be an oversized tennis ball. 'It's hard,' he said.

'Of course it's hard. Billany stood up and spread his arms wide. 'Now hit me in the belly.'

Draper's knuckles bounced against a surface considerably less yielding than a sandbag. 'You've got a corset on,' he said.

'Tive bob on it?'

He shook his head. 'You only bet on sure things.'

'Oh, I'm sure enough. Take a look.' Billany ripped open his shirt to expose an inch of scarlet underpants and a broad expanse of flat, hairy belly. Three girls sitting at the next table dissolved into a fit of giggles.

Billany flashed a smile in their direction. 'Every ounce of it home grown, but you mustn't touch. I'll want applications in writing.'

How fortunate to be a natural man, thought Draper. Not rich,

but with adequate funds; not worried about what people think about you; possessor of strong appetities, all of which can be indulged. 'You're a lucky sod,' he said.

'Don't I know it.' Billany drank deeply and inspected the inch of stout that remained in Draper's glass. 'Come on, drink up.'

'I can't take any more of this. It's too heavy.' He hesitated. 'I wouldn't mind something short.'

'Try a ball of malt.'

'Will it mix all right?'

'The perfect combination. Like bread and cheese.'

I must not get drunk, thought Draper. When he was drunk, he talked, and he must not talk about Bernard Swan's fifty pounds. He only wished that he felt more cheerful. He was out of debt, he was in pleasant company, and the girls at the next table were looking their way.

Billany returned with the drinks in time to intercept the glance. 'Not them,' he said softly. 'You don't want to go wasting your time with them.'

'Why not?'

'They're nothing but trotters. Taking a night off most likely, but it'd still cost you a packet.' He raised his glass and winked. 'And you might get more than you bargained for.'

'I see.' He turned his back to the girls, but from their giggles he guessed that they were still talking about him.

'I thought you were nicely set up, anyway.'

'You might call it that.' The whisky slid down like oil. The flavour was strange, but not unpleasant. 'It's a bit complicated,' he said.

Billany clicked his tongue wisely. 'Like that, is it?'

'She's married, you see.' It was nothing to do with what was worrying him, but he felt that the explanation was good enough to provoke sympathy. He did not feel any more cheerful, but the whisky was relaxing him. 'I've even met the husband,' he said.

Billany shook his head, and his beard rasped against his shirt collar. 'That doesn't sound at all right.'

'What's wrong with it?'

'It's a deceit,' said Billany 'You're taking the man's wife and at the same time making yourself out to be a friend'

'I'm not' Draper banged the table, and their glasses danced on the polished wood 'He's not a friend, and anyway he don't care.' Or was it, he wondered, that Afton did not know? 'They're separated,' he said 'They've been apart for years.'

He picked up the glasses and carried them to the bar. All the staff was Irish, the women with dark hair and fresh complexions, the men with high, polished cheek-bones, and long upper lips. None of them looked like Billany, but their movements were similar. They were brisk, and vigorous, rinsing glasses, slicing bread and punching the till, as if the energy they used came from a vast reserve that no amount of hard work could exhaust.

'Same again, he said

'Was it the Jamesons?'

'I expect so.' He was past caring. He could not drink away the depression that crouched behind his ribs like a small but heavy animal.

'Let's move on after this,' said Billany.

'Where to?'

'Where do you want to go. D'you fancy a bite to eat?'

He shook his head. 'I'm not hungry. I reckon bed's the best place.'

'That's all right by me.'

They caught a bus to the end of the terrace and then walked in silence. The nights were getting lighter, though Draper and his spirits rose perceptibly. The warm weather was no longer so much of a threat. He could afford to buy a new suit, and the raincoat could go to the cleaners.

The hall light was still on and they paused at the picture to inspect the gulls. 'Have you counted them?' asked Billany.

'No, but you can work it out. I've been here for about eighteen months, and I've allowed myself about four a month. That's just an average, I went mad at first.'

Billany stroked the canvas with the tip of his index finger. 'You should have left the man,' he said. 'He helped the composition.'

'Maybe you're right.' Draper unclipped his ball point, and in the trough of the biggest wave, drew two arms and a head, with the mouth gaping blackly open. 'How's that?'

'Give him a hat,' said Billany. 'With a ribbon.'

Draper added a pill-box hat with a ribbon that fluttered bravely in the gale. 'Anything else?'

Billany did not answer at once, and glancing up at him Draper saw him starting towards the dining room. He turned round slowly, already certain what was there. 'Good evening Mrs Barrow,' he said. 'We were just admiring the picture.'

He wondered why they had not heard the warning whistle of her petticoats but the mystery was easily explained. Mrs Barrow's hair was in curlers, and she wore a dressing gown. 'So it was you,' she said. She was very angry, he realized, and he wondered what he should do if she attempted to strike him.

'What was me?'

'Vandal,' she said. 'Defacing my picture. Scribbling all over it, and putting birds where they oughtn't to be.'

He was about to protest, until he remembered the pen in his hand. 'But it hasn't spoiled it Mrs Barrow,' he said. 'We were just saying how dramatic it looked.'

She folded her arms across her enormous breast. 'It was a valuable work of art, and it's ruined,' she said. 'I shall want compensation and I'm giving you both notice.'

'How much compensation?' It was too late to argue about who was responsible.

'Ten pounds.'

'But Mrs Barrow,' said Billany, 'isn't that rather a lot? Wouldn't you settle for us just paying to have it cleaned?'

Mrs Barrow shook her head, and her chin quivered massively like a block of farmhouse brawn. 'I'll take five pounds,' she said. 'Not a penny less.'

'Two pounds,' said Billany. 'And you get cash on the nail.'

There was a long, anxious pause, during which Draper began to count the gulls. There were more than he had thought. The estimate that he had given Billany was ridiculously modest.

'Two pounds, then,' said Mrs Barrow. 'But I meant it about the notice. A week from tomorrow and you're out.'

They nodded in unison, and she swung round, the skirt of her dressing gown swishing at her ankles, and steadily marched down the stairs to the basement. Neither of them spoke until they heard her door open and close, and her bed springs shriek beneath the sudden weight.

Billany reached for the pen. 'As we're paying for the thing we may as well have it the way we want it,' he said. His hands were large, but with surprising delicacy he began to draw a pipe in the mouth of the drowning man and then mermaids recklessly conjoined with a squid or sea monster.

When he had finished he stood back, rapt with admiration. 'What about that now?' he demanded.

The gulls could still be seen but they hid the rowing boats, and the waves were almost dotted out by an athletic frieze as ingenious as it was fanciful. Billany thoughtfully remembered that Billany was an engineer. He had been trained in the art of putting things together.

3

The suit was ready-made but it had style. Even Troy had to admit that. It was charcoal grey, with four buttons, fourteen-inch cuffs to the trousers, no turn ups, and raised seams from hip to ankle. Draper turned slowly his reflection in the triple mirror keeping him company. Clothes may not make a man, he thought, but they certainly helped to rearrange him.

'What d you think?' he asked Troy.

'Pretty good.'

'Don't strain yourself.'

Troy put his head on one side. 'It's fine,' he said. 'It's a great improvement.' He seemed about to continue, but instead, closed his mouth firmly.

'Go on, then. What else?'

'Well, you're only half way there. You need shirts and things. You can't go on wearing that rag.'

Draper peered at the mirror. 'The collar's a bit worn,' he admitted.

'It's falling apart.'

'It'll do for a bit yet.'

Troy shook his head emphatically. 'Not with that suit. Not unless you want to balls it all up.'

The trouble with Troy was that he was a perfectionist, thought Draper. But he was right all the same. He needed shirts, socks, ties, the lot. But already the money was running out. The suit was costing him twenty guineas. Tickets for a play that Cynthia wanted to see had set him back another thirty bob, and dinner would cost at least as much again. If he allowed five pounds for two or three shirts and a tie, he would be left with around twenty-two quid. But he had forgotten to take away the five that he had repaid Troy, plus two to Billany, plus the extra quid to Mrs Barrow, plus the fifteen bob he had spent on drink the previous night. With any luck at the day's end he

would have about nine pounds left of the fifty paid out by Bernard Swan.

'Will you pay cash, or by cheque sir?'

'I'll pay cash,' said Draper. He had never owned a cheque book in his life. Despite the advertisements, it had always seemed to him a symbol of impossible affluence. Money was something you spent. There was never enough of it to put in a bank. 'Have you got a bank account?'

'Why? You're not on the tap again?'

No, I just wanted to know.'

Troy nodded curtly. 'Yes, I've got one. Sally uses it too. We're saving up for a holiday.'

'That all?'

'That's all for the moment. I'll let you know when there's any development.' He started as Draper handed over the money. 'What happened to you? Come up on the pools or something?'

'No such luck,' said Draper. 'An aunt of mine pegged out and left me fifty quid.'

'Good for her.'

She was a nice old girl,' said Draper. 'I used to do her shopping on Saturday mornings. It was not a very inspired story, he thought, but the last bit added a touch of veracity.'

The assistant came over with his charge. 'Will you be taking your old suit with you, or would you like us to post it?'

'Post it, I think.' He did not want to lug a brown paper parcel with him to the theatre.

'Very good sir. May I have your address?'

He wrote it down on the back of one of Fleming's cards. 'I'm looking for new digs,' he told Troy. 'There was a bit of a barney last night with the landlords.'

'Nothing trivial, I hope.' Troy had met Mr. Barrow just once and the dislike had been instant and mutual.

'She made it into a big drama, but it wasn't much really,' said Draper. 'I just improved one of our pictures a bit. Put a few seagulls in, and that. You should see it now, though. Billany had a go at it last night after she'd gone to bed.'

Troy shook his head in mock reproof 'Very anti-social.'

'Very decorative,' said Draper. He looked at himself once more in the mirror. 'What about those shirts then?'

The shirts presented no problem. Troy insisted, and he agreed on white poplin with a black silk knitted tie. The difference they made was amazing, he thought, not merely to his appearance, but to the way he felt. Status was something you could buy over the counter. He not only *looked* a different person; he was a different person. See here, Fenning, he told a Belisha Beacon, you are no longer addressing one of your unpaid serfs. You are meeting your superior in thought, word, and deed, so kneel before I give you a taste of the knout.

'Are you on tomorrow?' asked Troy.

He kicked a match box into the gutter. The crowd cheered, the cameras flashed, the game was saved. 'No,' he said, 'I've got the weekend off. What about you?'

'On tomorrow. Off Sunday.' He looked up at the sky as a few fat drops of rain blotted the pavement around them. 'I'm thinking seriously about leaving the agency. This weekend work's murder.'

'Sally doesn't like it, you mean?'

'I don't like it. Neither do you. I can't think why everyone turns so bloody coy when I start going around with a girl my own age.'

'No one's getting coy,' said Draper. 'It's just that you're surrounded by well-wishers.'

'Surrounded by beady eyes, more like it. Including the family,' he thought. Everyone was watching and waiting for him to make a move, and they had left him in no doubt that it had better be the right one. The pressure was building up, and although so far no one had actually mentioned marriage, it hung over the proceedings like a cluster of cumulus, as fat and as yellow as butter to the man on the ground, but sopping wet and as cold as death once you were inside it. Briefly, he almost envied Draper, but not for long. That episode was over. Sally was the proper objective now, he realized that. But he would decide for himself. No one was pushing him into anything. No one was going to tell him what to do.

'You're late,' said Sally. She closed the hall door and put her arms round him, running her tongue along the edge of his ear, and stroking the back of his neck. She was wearing a yellow cashmere sweater and when she moved her body, pressing herself against his chest, he could tell that there was no brassière beneath.

He held her at arm's-length. 'Where are they then?'

'Out. They're away for the week-end.'

'When are they coming back?'

'Sunday night.' She swirled away and pushed open the kitchen door. 'We're expected to behave.'

'Did they actually say that?'

'Not in so many words, but that's what they meant.'

'They've probably got hidden cameras all over the place.' He pulled open the china cupboard. 'Filthy pictures of Miss Virtue in the nude. Naughty but nice.'

She laughed delightedly. 'Not a hope.'

'Really?' He caught her round the waist, spanning her broad hips, and drawing her close. 'You really mean that?'

'We've had all this before.' Her face was less than an inch away, and he could smell the fresh, grassy scent of her breath. 'You mustn't be a bore,' she said. 'You mustn't go on about things.'

He let her go with a sigh. 'I can't help going on about some things. If you've got something on your mind, you keep on about it. You can't help sounding a bore. It's just human nature.'

'And you've got more human nature than anyone I've ever met.'

'Lucky old me.'

'Lucky old you.'

She filled a glass jug with water, and dropped in a handful of ice cubes. 'Would you like a drink before we eat?'

'Are we eating here, then?'

'Unless you object to home cooking.' She counted her fingers. 'Grilled steak, mashed potatoes, frozen peas, pancakes, and coffee. How's that?'

'Marvellous,' said Troy. She was on the verge of being a

shade too bright, he thought. Belligerent cheerfulness always made him feel like a patient, flat on his back with some professionally jolly crow telling him what a wonderful world it was if only he would exert himself to take a look at it. But Sally was not like that. Her patter probably covered a slight case of nerves. 'I will have that drink, then,' he said. 'What about you?'

'Nothing for me, but you go ahead.'

'Not if you don't.'

She put on an apron, covered with pictures of meek little men wearing haloes. 'All right, then. I'll have a lager.'

'Coming up,' said Troy.

He poured the drinks and sat at the kitchen table while she cooked the meal. There was a feeling of constraint between them, and in the long silences he heard the rain, heavy now, thrash against the windows.

'It's like the night we came back from Fpping,' she said.

'Good job we're not out in it.'

'It's nice to listen to, though.'

'Yes.' He put down his glass and watched her silhouetted against the window: the sleeves of her sweater rolled up to the elbow, her jeans tught over firm buttocks. 'Sally,' he said, 'I'm very fond of you.'

'I like you too.'

'No, I mean *really* fond.'

The steaks spluttered under the grill and she turned them with a fork. 'That's what I meant.'

He reached out to touch her but she stepped to one side. 'Sally,' he said, 'please.'

'It's time to eat.'

'For Christ's sake!'

'First things first,' she said. 'I paid good money for these steaks, and I'm not going to see them spoiled.'

Throughout the meal they kept breaking off eating to hold hands, and over coffee she shared his cigarette. When he put it back into his own mouth the tip tasted faintly of her lipstick. They stacked the dishes in the sink, and ran hot water over them.

'Who's going to wash?' he asked

'Leave them'

'I don't mind doing them' he said

'Leave them'

'What do you want to do then?'

'What do you want to do?'

He loosened the string of her apron. I don't know. What about playing some records?'

The apron dropped to the floor but neither of them picked it up. They walked out of the kitchen and up the stairs and not until they reached the door of her room did Iroy notice that it was Sally who led the way.

The play thought Draper was a dead loss. It was set in a railway station where two young lovers talk about life to a Mysterious Stranger and the train kept going significantly by to the accompaniment of a waltz tune played on a barrel organ.

But what does it mean? he protested as they battled for a drink in the stalls bar.

I should have thought it was pretty obvious.

Not to me. He signalled frantically to the barmaid. 'Dry sherry and a light ale, dear.'

Well they're all waiting on limbs.

They're what? Draper grabbed the drinks and shoved money on to the bar. 'Who's the Mysterious Stranger then?' He had a firm belief which he had not yet tried on Cynthia, that all books and plays involving characters known either by their initials or by symbolic titles were not worth bothering about. Art was difficult enough without turning it into a club for members only.

'He's whatever you want him to be,' said Cynthia. 'An angel, if you like. Or Death. Or God.'

'Oh God,' said Draper.

'Very funny.'

'But honestly,' he said, 'do you really enjoy it?'

She caught sight of someone across the bar and waved her programme. 'Yes, I enjoy it.'

'Well, I don't.'

'If you'd just make an effort,' said Cynthia. 'It's not above the level of any normal intelligence.'

'Meaning I'm stupid.'

'Not at all, just lazy.'

The pattern, thought Draper, was becoming familiar. On an average they quarrelled once a week, although 'quarrel' was not the best description for the indecisive hickering that was usually touched off by a difference of opinion over something quite unimportant. The trouble with Cynthia was that she was better informed, better read, and – as far as money was concerned – better off than he was. At first, her arrogance had not been apparent. The need for companionship, as much as for love, had overlaid any form of assertion on her part. But now the convalescence was over, and the job with Afton had speeded her recovery. She used him, he sometimes felt, as a punch ball to tone up muscles which she had allowed to become flabby.

'I'm not lazy,' he said.

'If you weren't lazy you'd look for another job. You're wasting your time where you are.'

'All right. Suggest somewhere I haven't already tried.'

She shook her head, and the clips in her ear, swung like small candelabra. 'It's not for me to suggest anything.'

Not much. You never stop.'

The bell rang for the start of the second act and she got up immediately. 'Perhaps you'd rather wait here if you dislike it so much.'

'No. I want to see who the Mysterious Stranger is.'

'You make it sound like a cheap thriller.'

'I wish it was,' said Draper.

She did not reply but turned away so violently that she knocked over a small gilt chair. He picked it up and hurried after her. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I was just being bloody minded.'

'Yes, you were.'

'I'm trying to apologize.'

'Try harder.'

He caught her by the wrists and held her against the wall.

while men in dinner jackets pushed by them, and women in evening dresses glanced at them with quick curiosity. 'You're making us conspicuous,' she said.

'I don't care about that I said I was sorry, and you tried to make things worse.'

'I did nothing of the kind.'

'You did,' he said fiercely.

Suddenly her shoulders drooped and she leaned against him. 'All right,' she said 'I was annoyed, that's all Let's talk about it later I'm sorry I went on the way I did'

He relaxed his grip and gently massaged her wrists 'I didn't mean to hurt you'

'You didn't hurt me Let's go in now Let's see the rest of it.'

The lights dimmed as they found their seats but as the curtain rose she was aware of his profile to one side of her, creased in concentration He *did* try, she thought, and it was stupid to argue over things which were not debatable Not by John Draper and herself, she mended Their differences stemmed from more than simply opposing points of view. The real trouble was that Draper had not yet found his point of view. He was still feeling his way, and her impatience and his resentment were two sides of the same coin He was so young, she thought, although - in years at least - he was older than Harry Troy. But age, and intelligence, and sophistication were related only by accident Taking stock she could not honestly say that she was any more shrewd than she had been ten years before Time had given her nothing except experience (and anyone could acquire experience), and woe (with which she could cover anything from a menstrual pain to a sudden grief). Time gave nothing without taking something in return And there was no bargaining with time The rates of exchange were fixed, and no one - whether they were clever, or foolish, or greedy, or generous - showed a profit in the end

Beyond the footlights the lovers embraced and the barrel organ played its maudlin tune She reached out for Draper's hand, and uncomprehendingly he took it. There was no time like the present, she thought, no other time that would bear thinking about.

There must be at least twenty lambs on the lampshade, Troy decided. They wore blue bows round their necks and their hoofs shone like patent leather. 'Have they got names?' he asked.

Sally rolled her head from side to side on the pillow. 'No names.'

Her voice was drowsy, and he snapped off the light. 'Why not go to sleep for a bit.'

'Oh, no.' She squirmed against him, spreading herself like butter. 'I don't want to sleep. I don't want to waste a single minute.'

'There'll be other times.'

'Not like this. Not ever like this.'

He kissed her in reply and she burrowed closer, twining her legs about his, and dabbing with her tongue at the sweat on his chest. 'It's salty,' she said.

'All sweat's salty.'

'I know. But yours is saltier than mine.'

He bent his head and caught one nipple between his lips. 'Very tasty.'

'Harry, don't.' She pressed his head back on the pillow. 'What time is it?'

'About half past eleven'

'You should be going home'

'Why? They're not coming back till Sunday.'

'That's not the point We don't want the neighbours talking.'

'I don't care about the neighbours.'

'I do'

Spoken like your father's daughter, he thought, conscious to the last of the vigilantes laying in wait behind their nylon net curtains. But it was not unreasonable, he could see that There was no sense in stirring up gossip. 'All right, then,' he said. 'I'll start moving'

She held on to him as he shifted to the side of the bed. 'Not yet I didn't mean right away.'

It was still raining, and they listened to the liquid sounds of the gutter outside the window. 'Have there been many others?' she asked.

He hesitated. 'Not many.'

'How many?'

'Does it matter?'

'Not really but I want to know.'

'One or two then.'

'Did you love them?'

He gripped her face between his finger and thumb, and shook it gently. 'What if I did. It's you I love now.'

'I'm glad' She lay beside him breathing quietly. 'You're the first,' she said. 'I've never gone all the way with anyone else.'

'I know.'

'Was it ... all right? You must tell me if I do anything wrong.'

He stroked the length of her body and brought his hand back to bury it in her hair. 'It was wonderful,' he said.

'You're sure?'

'Quite sure.'

She sighed contentedly 'I'm glad'

The curtains shook in a gust of wind and he cradled her in his arms. 'When they get back we'll tell them we want to get married,' he said. No questions had been asked, and no answer given, but there was no need. The understanding had always been there. All that had been in doubt was how long it would take him to acknowledge it.

Draper rinsed his face with water and spread a blob of shaving cream along his jaw. It smelled medicinal, and on the tube he read that it contained menthol. Cynthia had bought it and left it in the bathroom without mentioning it to him. She had also bought the razor and the blades (rigid, one-sided things, whereas if she had asked him he could have told her that he preferred the thin, double-edged variety). He was not ungrateful, but he wished that sometimes she would give him credit for having ideas of his own.

The shaving mirror had been installed by Troy. It was screwed to the wall on a collapsible arm, and it magnified the pores in his skin so that, on a bad morning, they looked like craters in a patch of pink asphalt. Nothing else of Troy's re-

mained in the flat, and he had not – as far as Draper knew – stayed there for any length of time. Cynthia would never have allowed it, he thought. Although she was glad of company, the flat remained a bolt-hole, a place to which she could retreat and be alone. She had found it shortly after leaving Afton, and without being told in so many words he guessed that it represented independence, a decisive break with the life she had found unbearable.

Even now, when she was back helping to run Afton's business, the break was still clearly defined. The books were hers, and so were the pictures on the walls. The records were her favourites, and the curtains and lampshades reflected her taste and no one else's. He had told her that he was leaving his digs, half-hoping that she would invite him to move in, but she had not done so. He was not offended. They were close enough as they were. Intimacy was not an unmixed blessing, and the quarrels – which would have been unavoidable if he had shared the flat, as well as Cynthia's bed – would not only become more frequent; their intensity would grow too.

He creamed his face again, and shaved half an inch from his sideburns. Cynthia had suggested *that* too, he recalled, when the damage was done. She had also given him the name of a new barber, but – as he had already discovered – all Cynthia's suggestions entailed spending money. A short back and sides at the barber-shop recommended by Cynthia would set him back at least ten bob. What was more, they would probably haul him back for a shampoo, and dry him off under a hair net. He brushed down his fringe, and – using the nail scissors – trimmed it level with his eyebrows. It was a bit ragged, but at least it was free.

He washed off the remnants of the cream and dried his face. There was nothing she could do about *that*, either, not that she ever complained. In fact, she seemed to like it, studying it at odd minutes during the day, and at night feeling it all over with her fingers as if she was blind. Or as if she was about to go blind and was committing to memory a familiar object which she feared might soon be broken or lost.

The collar of his shirt was slightly soiled but, with his jacket

on, it hardly showed. He knotted the tie and pulled it tight. Cynthia had approved of the entire outfit and belatedly it occurred to him that the clothes she had considered to be in good taste had been chosen principally by Troy. It might be a coincidence, he thought, but there was a strong possibility that Troy's preferences were not wholly original. He had been around Cynthia long enough for her to have injected him with her own likes and dislikes. It took time to develop an antibody—in Troy's case, a full year. And even then, some of the effects were permanent.

He ran the taps and wiped carefully round the bowl (Cynthia objected to tide marks, and stray hairs), and walked through into the bedroom. The breakfast tray was on the floor beside the bed, and as he picked it up the door bell rang.

'Want me to see who it is?'

'Would you?' She was still wearing her dressing-gown, and her face was plastered with cleansing cream.

He closed the bedroom door, and glanced quickly round the living-room to see if there were any dirty glasses. There was one beside the soldiers on the bookcase and as he hid it behind a cushion, the door bell rang again.

'Coming,' he called out and kicking the papers to one side, pulled the door open.

The shock was so great that for several seconds he forgot to breathe, and when he did so he had the feeling that his chest was corseted with baling wire. 'Good morning,' he said, registering the fact that his voice was hardly more than a croak.

'Good morning,' said Guy. 'Afternoon. I believe you already know Mr Dewar.'

4

Guy Afton enjoyed being alone in the office on a Saturday. The rest of the building was locked and silent. In the lobby there was a smell of floor polish, and his heels squeaked along the waxed corridors, where fire extinguishers and buckets of sand lined the walls like a guard of honour. The lift was self-operated, and he could come and go as he pleased. There was no need for secrecy, but he enjoyed the sensation of having no one there to observe his movements. He was a devious man, and although he mingled when it was necessary he had found that strength came, not only from unity, but also from solitary manipulation and private rehearsal.

To function efficiently he needed a staff, but there were times when the staff was superfluous. He sat at his desk, and unlocked the tape recorder, and pressed the button to playback. There was a faint rustle of paper and then his own voice, loud and confident. He turned down the volume slightly and sat back to listen. The last edition of 'Brass Tacks' was said to have had a viewing figure of twenty millions, but Guy Afton was his own best audience.

'My friends,' said the voice, 'and I know that I can truly call you my friends, because during the time I have spent among you I have encountered nothing but warmth, and hospitality, and candour. Especially candour, and I welcome it, for friends speak plainly one to another. They say what they mean, and even those of you who cast your vote for my opponent have done me the honour – I repeat, the honour – of telling me your hopes, your fears, and your dearest wishes for this constituency, and for this great country of ours.'

There was a long pause, and Afton scribbled on the block at his elbow: Delete 'hospitality' insert 'kindness'; delete 'constituency' insert 'great town'. He underlined the revisions and the voice continued, but now it was muted and close to tears.

'You have chosen me to make known those wishes,' it said. 'You have chosen me to represent you in Parliament. And at this moment I am touched, and humble, and deeply grateful.' There was another pause, during which Afton counted to ten. 'I will serve you,' said the voice firmly. 'I will carry your cause to the highest places of this land. When you need me, I will be here. When you need a champion, I will be ready. My voice will be your voice. I shall be with you always.' Afton pressed the 'Stop' button and scowled. It was not right yet. A Biblical note always went down well, especially with a provincial audience, but at the moment it sounded faintly sacrilegious. He wrote on the pad: *Delete 'touched' insert 'moved'*. Check fresh quotation. Query Good Shepherd leading us all. His speech of acceptance was in its second draft now, and it was one which he did not propose to show to Cynthia.

Cynthia knew about tact, and how to make friends and influence people, but no one could tell him how to handle the big emotional moment. He knew the secret (if a technique so apparent could be called a secret) of going to the heart of a mass audience. It was simply to take one step beyond the limits of good taste, not just to state the obvious but to shout it or sob it so that the sentiment became as crude as an illustration on a box of chocolates or a pop song played on an electric organ. Driving through the black streets of his constituency (already he regarded it as his own) he had noticed the plaster figures in the windows of the flats and the terrace houses. There were gilt Africans, peasant boys in ragged trousers, and, ubiquitously, small girls eating cherries. They were simple and sentimental and they were looked on as reverently as household gods. Of course, as voters they had the telly and the fridge, and cocktail cabinets which lit up when the door opened, but those were innovations. They had not yet taken root: they were not part of the tradition. The figures were loved because they fulfilled a deep instinctive need. They touched the core of feeling. And there was a lesson there for anyone with something to sell, thought Guy, including politicians.

He rewound the tap and played the speech over again. The

accent could do with a little broadening, and some of the words were still too long. But the sentiment was right. It was a pity, he thought, that they no longer had those torchlight processions, the streets alive with hundreds of small flames that gathered in a great shuddering pool outside the town hall, the wind plucking off threads of smoke, and the helmets of the police glinting like sparks as they were jostled by the crowd. Reputations were made at times like that. They gave people something to remember. And the ability to reminisce, to recollect a shared experience – not in tranquillity, but in yearning – was an asset which he would do well to acquire. He wrote on the pad 'Inquire Fire Regulations. Query availability of torches.' Attention to detail was what consolidated a man's success.

Afton locked the tape recorder and put it to one side. Lighting a cigarette, he padded through the communicating door into Cynthia's office and poked through the papers on her desk. He did not expect to find anything incriminating, or even interesting (Cynthia knew his habits too well) but occasionally he had come across the odd memo, or the indiscreet letter which he read attentively, and then replaced exactly where he had found it. He took no notes, memory was his only aid, and if he forgot the information he had uncovered, it was because it was not really important.

It was surprising, though, how often, and how useful the random scrap of intelligence could be. It was from a pencilled note, which he had retrieved from the wastepaper basket of his former editor, that he had learned how highly he was regarded by the proprietor of the paper, and accordingly he had demanded a rise. A confidential report on the sexual indiscretions of a fellow panellist (left unguarded for one moment by the producer's secretary) had prompted a series of innocently phrased questions which led to the panellist's resignation. Information, however trivial, was always important. And Afton was aware of its value, not only to himself, but to others.

There was nothing on Cynthia's desk, nothing in the files which he did not already know about. He zipped up his briefcase, and gave a final adjustment to the card still propped

against his ash-tray. 'Afton Asks Why' was sure to be a winner, he felt it in his bones. The windows of his office faced west, but as he stepped into the corridor, the late-morning sun struck back blindingly from the polished floor. The entire building had an air of careful grooming. There was no doubt that Cynthia had made the right choice.

He pressed the button for the lift before noticing that it was already on its way up. He frowned slightly. It was unusual for anyone else to visit the office on a Saturday morning. At Afton's floor there was a mellow 'ping' and the doors slid open. 'Why, hello there,' said Mr Dewar, 'I was just on my way to see you.'

They shook hands vigorously. 'Should we go back to my office?' asked Afton.

Dewar was the last person he had expected (or wanted) to see, and a certain formality helped to speed the proceedings. In an office one could always plead the imminence of more work.

'But you were just on your way out,' said Mr Dewar.

'Well, actually I was just going for an early lunch and then coming back for another couple of hours.'

'Going home for lunch?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'Splendid,' said Mr Dewar. He pressed the button and they fell smoothly towards the ground floor. 'I promised your wife some brushes,' he said, 'just a few samples from our latest lines. I'd like to hand them over in person.'

'Very kind of you,' said Afton. His stomach tightened with apprehension as they passed the first floor, and turned smartly over as the lift bounced to a stop.

Mr Dewar chuckled. 'Fast lifts for speedy people.'

'Yes, indeed.' If he took Dewar to his own flat, he was bound to realize that Cynthia did not live there. The place was not only small; it showed no trace of a woman's hand. It was dusty (the cleaner had last been there on Wednesday); the only food was in tins; there were no flowers; no clothes to suggest the absent wearer; and, most important, there was no smell of a woman's presence. Glancing at Mr Dewar's fleshy nostrils, Afton

was positive that one twitch would tell him that Cynthia lived elsewhere.

'I ought to warn her that you're coming,' he said. 'By telephone, I mean.'

Mr Dewar's swarthy hand clamped directly over his kidneys and propelled him towards the street. 'Nonsense Not at all necessary. I'll only be there for a moment. Just want to pay my respects to the lady wife, then I'll be off.' He pushed the door open and gestured towards a large black car by the kerb. 'Hop in,' he said, 'I don't suppose it's far. We'll be there in a couple of ticks.'

He drove quickly and expertly through the traffic, following Afton's directions 'I was just up for a couple of days,' he said. 'Company's business. The old personal touch. Keeping them at it. Letting them know you're interested And I thought that while I was passing through I might just as well deliver the goods with my own fair hands.' He jammed his fist on the horn and a bubble car darted from beneath the car wheels 'Road lice,' he said, 'that's what they are As I was saying, I just popped the old brushes in the back and brought them along with me Just keeping a promise I made the other day.' He slowed down at a 'Halt' sign and then shot across the junction. 'I might say,' he went on, 'strictly on the QT, that you and your lady wife made a tremendous impression with our people. Never heard such a fuss in my life. If it was up to them you'd be P M'

'Next turning on the right,' said Afton. What Mr Dewar said was encouraging, but there were months to go before he was home and dry, and there was still plenty that could go wrong. He tapped Mr Dewar on the wrist. 'Right here. Next to the wine store'

'Very handy.'

'It's convenient for most things,' said Afton. 'Actually we've been looking for a house, but what we want hasn't turned up yet' He broke off, reminding himself that Mr Dewar was the sort of man who might engage Cynthia in domestic gossip. He would have to brief her on the house as soon as possible.

They walked up the stairs and he rang the bell. When the

door opened and he saw Draper's startled face he could have hit it. Instead he smiled and said 'Good morning. I believe you already know Mr Dewar.' He picked up the parcel of brushes that his companion had propped against the wall 'Mr Draper comes from your part of the world,' he said, 'he joined my staff a few weeks ago.'

'He's the biggest bloody liar that ever walked,' said Draper. 'And smooth. I tell you, at the end of half an hour I was ready to believe him myself.'

Troy poked at the keys of his typewriter with a paper clip. 'And how did it end?'

'Cynthia and Afton took him off to lunch and I was sent home like a good little boy.'

'Best place to be. Well out of it.'

'But I'm not Afton wants me to go and see him on Monday. I went out to the hog and he came after me to tell me just that.'

'He probably wants to give you a medal. Conspicuous gallantry and all that.'

'Very funny.'

'Well, he can't do anything to you,' argued Troy. 'It can't be anything bad.'

'With my luck? It can't be anything good, you mean.' He looked up through the grating 'Any talent today?'

'I haven't looked.'

It was hopeless, thought Draper. He had come to the office to talk to Troy, expecting, not advise exactly, but at least some kind of chat to dispel the gloom. But Troy seemed to be almost in a trance. He was dressed normally. He spoke clearly. But protecting him from the world there was a detachment that was almost tangible, like a transparent track suit that repelled any real contact. He went through the motions of being interested, but all the time his mind was somewhere else.

'Money,' said Draper.

'What about it?'

'Beer.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Sex.

Troy gave a final probe with the paper clip and tossed it on to the floor. 'You're round the bend.'

'They're all important words,' said Draper. 'Possibly the three most important words in your life. And mine. I just wanted to see how you reacted to the stimuli.' He shook his head sadly. 'My diagnosis is that you're three-quarters dead. From the knees up.'

'Why don't you wrap up?' said Troy. 'Not everyone's such a little ram as you'

'Look who's talking'

Troy selected another paper clip and bent it into an irregular hoop. He slipped it over the third finger of his left hand. 'If you *must* know,' he said, 'I'm getting married.'

'You're not!'

'All right, then. I'm not.'

But it was true. There was no chance that Troy was joking. He sat at his desk with a smug, stupid smile on his face, proud of himself for having finally walked into the trap, for sticking his head in the bag, for getting lumbered with a girl who probably knew that his father had money.

'Whose idea was it?'

'Mine, I suppose.'

'She's not in the club?'

The moment the words had left his mouth he realized they should not have been uttered. Troy was standing over him, and he was no longer smiling. 'You want to watch it.'

'I'm sorry.'

'People lose their teeth saying things like that.'

'I said I was sorry'

'All right then.' He sat down again and lit a cigarette. 'She's not in the club, and she's going to be married in white, and if you can learn a few manners you can come to the wedding.'

'Good. Thanks very much.' His hands were shaking, and he stuffed them into his pockets. 'When's it going to be?'

'Two or three months yet. I told you we were saving up for a holiday. We can make it a honeymoon now.'

'Good idea.' It was jealousy, he realized. He was jealous of

two people, too young to know any better, who had walked into a padded cell and locked the door behind them. 'You can put me down for a present' he said

'What, on Fenning's wages?'

'I can starve for a while' said Draper. 'A month on vitamin pills ought to do it.' There was a clatter of feet on the grating and he jerked his head back.

'Too late,' said Troy. 'She's gone.'

'I'd better be going too. See you on Monday.'

'And Afton,' said Troy.

My God, yes, he thought. And Afton.

'You amaze me,' said Guy Afton. 'You really mazz me. Here you are, an intelligent woman with some ideas about taste and you go chasing after some scruffy little errand boy simply because you've got an itch that needs scratching.'

'I didn't chase him, said Cynthia. 'It's not like that at all.'

'Very well, you didn't chase him. He came after you. I suppose. But you didn't get out of the way. You welcomed him with open arms. And then you let him into your flat. You slept with him, and you bloody well kept him here for Dewar to see.'

'I didn't know Dewar was coming. You brought him.'

'It was you he wanted to see. I've told you why I couldn't take him to my place. But that's not important. The point is, what does he think about it? What's he going to tell them up there?'

'Why should he tell them anything? I don't think he noticed anything unusual.'

'For Christ's sake!' Guy dropped heavily on to the edge of the settee. 'He'd have to be a bloody moron not to think there was something a bit odd going on. He bounced to his feet and gave a mock bow. Good morning Mr Draper. Would you tell my wife there's someone to see her, and make sure she's got her knickers on before she comes out. He paced up and down the carpet, his hands jammed into his jacket pockets. 'I know it doesn't matter to you,' he said. 'But it makes me look a bloody fool. That's what matters most.'

'Of course'

'And don't use that tone of voice to me. It *does* matter, and it's got to be put right.'

Cynthia lit a cigarette. 'You've got some brilliant idea, I suppose'

'Not brilliant: very simple. You're going to drop him.'

'Because you say so'

He nodded once 'Because I say so.'

They looked at each other steadily for several seconds and she thought how much she loathed him 'You can't force me to do anything,' she said, 'that's all over. You can't make me do anything I don't want to do.'

'Really?'

'Really,' she said 'I don't care what you think, or what you say. You can't touch me.'

'And what about Mister Draper? Do you think he'll care?'

'Why should he?'

'Because I can bloody well make him care.' Guy levelled his index finger at her chest, and wagged it to emphasise each word 'He's like everyone else He jumps when he hears the whip crack He knows what's good for him He's not looking for trouble'

He came closer, and she drew back in her chair. 'You know nothing about him'

'And you know everything, I suppose.'

'More than you.'

He rocked contentedly on his heels. 'I doubt it.'

'You mean you've been checking up'

'John Terence Draper,' he recited 'Twenty-three years old. Two years' army service with the R.A.S.C. Discharged with the rank of corporal. Employed as a reporter by Fenning's Features. Salary: £360 a year. Both parents still living Father an accountant.' He paused and cocked his head to one side. 'Right so far?'

'You're very thorough,' she said bitterly.

'Of course I'm thorough. Otherwise it's a waste of time.' He sat in the chair facing her. 'Not up to much, is he? Not much of a catch for someone like you.'

She felt naked. Not simply unclothed, but shamefully naked,

as if she was being held beneath a bright light and every crevice of her body was open to inspection 'I'm very fond of him,' she said

'And what about Mister Draper, with his £560 a year? How does he feel?'

'I can't answer for him.'

'I can,' said Guy 'He's out for what he can get.'

She saw herself reflected in Guy's spectacles a white face on a body which dwindled to nothing and she felt compelled to speak To say something which would bring her back to size 'He loves me,' she said He told me he loves me, and I believe him' Her voice trembled unexpectedly, tears stung her eyes

Guy offered her his handkerchief, but she ignored it and walked briskly into her bedroom He followed her to the open door, and waited until she found a box of tissues 'You believe him,' he said wonderingly

'Why shouldn't I?'

'Because it's stupid He gripped her shoulder, and turned her slowly round to face him We both know it's stupid I mean, it's one thing to *indulge* oneself I'm not blaming you for that But it's quite another thing to become *infatuated* with a kid like Draper You don't mean a thing to him Not really. You'll see.'

'And you'll make sure that I do.'

'I'm only telling you something you already know.'

She shook her head violently I don't know it I don't believe you You're judging him by your own standards'

'Are they so very different?' asked Guy He tucked his hand beneath her elbow and led her back into the sitting room 'Look,' he said, there's no sense in quarrelling over this You want time to think it over Why not give it till Monday He's coming to see me then.'

'What about?'

'Just a chat.'

Her fingers found a loose thread on her dress, and she snapped it off 'I know your chats.'

'You're invited,' said Guy 'I'd very much like you to be there.'

His manner had changed. His voice was agreeable once more, and he smiled with what looked like genuine friendliness. 'You're up to something,' she said. 'I can always tell.'

He clicked his tongue reproachfully. 'I merely want you to see things as they are. If we're going to quarrel, let's be sure what we're quarrelling about. Is that so unreasonable?'

'I know what we're quarrelling about.'

'I don't think you do. Give it some thought over the weekend.' He glanced round the flat. 'Does he live here?'

'No, he doesn't.'

'Then you don't have to see him till Monday.'

'Not if I don't want to.'

Guy nodded, and again she was aware of her own reflection in his spectacles. When he moved his head, her face was distorted, and the windows bled brilliantly into the frames. 'Seriously, I'd advise against seeing him,' he said. 'You can't be objective any other way. You need to be by yourself for a while.'

'But I don't want to be by myself.'

'You mean *daren't*. You don't want to risk being wrong.'

'That's ridiculous,' she said. 'I don't need to prove anything.'

'Don't you? Not even to yourself?' He walked over to the book-case, and incuriously poked at the lead soldier in the ambulance. 'I'll make a bargain with you,' he said. 'stay away from him till Monday, and see how he looks then. If he's all you think he is, I won't say another word. Not another word.'

She watched his thick fingers fondle the soldier's face, and remembered the first time that Draper had come to the flat. The question of whether or not he loved her was almost irrelevant now. But he was not out for what he could get. She was certain of that; certain enough and angry enough to want to ram the proof down Afton's throat.

'Well,' he said, 'is it a bargain?'

'A bargain,' said Cynthia. 'For what it's worth.'

The picture was gone from the foot of the stairs, but a bright patch of wallpaper, on which blue flowers battled with orange leaves, marked the place where it had been.

'She burned it,' said Billany.

'On a fire?'

'Where else?'

'That settles it, then,' said Draper. 'She can give me my quid back.'

Billany chewed busily on a boiled potato. 'You'd stand a better chance of getting blood from a stone.'

'It's worth a try.'

'Not a hope, boyo'

Draper ignored him. 'And it's about time someone told her about this bloody stew.' He pushed his plate to the centre of the table and poured himself a glass of water. The ancestor hanging opposite stared over his high collar and, rebelliously, Draper stared back. The whole crew looked as though they suffered from chronic indigestion, he thought. Bad cooking was probably a family tradition.

'But I gather you won't be putting up with it much longer,' said Mr Beadle.

'That's right. I'm off. Billany and me.

'Found anywhere else yet?'

'I haven't started looking.'

'It's not easy. Not at all easy.'

Any minute, thought Draper, and he would burst into tears. He was lying when he said he had not looked for new digs. After leaving Troy in the office he had spent two hours walking round South Kensington, with a pencilled newspaper jammed in his pocket. By the end of the afternoon he had been to a dozen addresses, but every one of them had been too expensive.

'What about you?' he asked Billany. 'Why don't we move in somewhere together?'

Billany shook his head. 'I've got my cousin coming over from Dublin next week. He's got a place fixed up already, and I'll be going in with him.'

'Will there be room for me?'

'I doubt it.'

'I can sleep in the bath,' said Draper, trying desperately not to sound as eager as he felt.

'There's no bath.'

Draper downed his water. 'Ah, well,' he said, 'something's bound to turn up.'

There was a whistle in the passage and Mrs Barrow came in with a tray of stewed fruit. Mr Beadle dabbed at his lips with his table napkin, and smiled ingratiatingly. 'Figs?' he inquired.

'And prunes,' said Mrs Barrow.

Draper pushed his chair back from the table, and heaved himself noisily to his feet. 'Not for me, thank you.'

'What's wrong with them?'

Mr Beadle pleated his napkin, and pointed with one mottled finger at the discarded plate of stew. 'I think our young friend must be a little out of sorts. Although when I think of the needy ones in other parts of the world, it pains me to see good food going to waste.'

'It won't go to waste,' said Draper. 'It'll go back in the pot ready for next time, won't it, Mrs Barrow?'

The tray dropped noisily to the table, prune juice spraying over the starched white cloth. 'I don't think any of us appreciate your sense of humour, Mr Draper,' she said. 'All food in this house is freshly prepared from the best ingredients.'

If you put it to music, thought Draper, it would sound like a commercial, 'Perhaps you've been done over the ingredients,' he suggested. 'Maybe they slipped in a bit of scrag end among the fillets.'

Mrs Barrow collected the empty plates and loaded them on to the lift. Her hair had been freshly tinted and several ounces of glass beads rattled on her chest. Nothing could touch her, he thought. Nothing could *really* touch her. She was probably a female impersonator, with bleeding hearts tattooed on each brawny arm, and enough muscle to tear telephone directories in half. He made one last attempt. 'Mrs Barrow, I believe there's a leak in my roof. The plaster feels very damp.'

She shot him a glance from under her brows, thin tracings of black, like footpaths over newly-cut stubble. 'I can't imagine what you were doing feeling the plaster,' she said. 'But I'll have it seen to. After you've gone.'

The ancestors gave him a multiple look of contempt, and only Billany, shreds of stewed fruit hanging like dew from the

rim of his moustache, raised his spoon cheerfully as he backed out of the room. Something had better turn up, he told himself. Time was running out.

He tried four more addresses, but they were no good. At one house, the self-contained flat that was advertised was a single room with a cooker, a folding bed and a hip-bath. Hot water was extra. At another place, a basement this time, cockroaches drew back like surf as the light flicked on.

'I don't think so,' said Draper. 'Not for me.'

'But they're clean in facts,' said the landlord. 'They only come out when there's food left lying about. The last lot who lived here were messy eaters.'

'Obviously.'

He walked back towards the digs and in a box by the church telephoned Cynthia's number. It rang uninterruptedly for two minutes, and even when he tried the number again there was still no answer. The pigeons were back on the terrace and as he advanced toward them they bustled to one side, their bright garnet eyes ogling him; they scavenge along the gutter. The Beadle bird was there, and Mrs Parrot and Brewer. It must be pretty good, he thought, to be able to cruise around picking up your food, not having to worry about your next meal or a place to sleep. He clapped his hands and the whole flock took to the air.

In the digs they were watching the telly and he perched on the edge of the billiard table. Mr Beadle's bald head gleaming directly in front of him like a puddle turned inside out. Pipe smoke wreathed slowly to the ceiling like incense, and the fire smouldered in the grate. Pretty soon there would be no more fires. Mrs Barrow ran her household according to the seasons as they were laid down by law. There could be blizzards in August, but if summertime was official, the door of the coal cellar remained locked.

There ought to be more people in the house, said Mr Beadle thumping the arm of his chair. 'More people prepared to speak their mind.'

Draper glanced at the small flickering screen and saw Guy

Afton – his bow-tie tugged to one side – hammering the tabletop, and scowling at the camera ‘Greed,’ he was saying, ‘greed is the curse of the twentieth century We live in the age of grab it while you-can, the age of a poor day’s work for a bigger day’s pay This is the age of something for nothing the age of the artful dodger’

‘True enough’ said Mr Beadle, bubbling into his pipe

‘I tell you’ said Guy, ‘we need more of the spirit of a man I met today, a small businessman whose credo is “service” And believe me that is not an idle word This very morning he travelled over four hundred miles to keep a promise to a customer He thumped the table, and the camera moved in for a big close up Four hundred miles to make a delivery To keep a promise *That is the meaning of service*’

‘He’s right you know,’ said Mr Beadle ‘He’s absolutely right’

‘He’s a bloody liar’ said Draper

Mr Beadle swung round in his chair ‘Where did you spring from?’

‘Out of the woodwork I said he was a bloody liar’

Mr Beadle applied a match to the bowl of his pipe, and allowed thick coils of white smoke to trickle from between his lips He grunted with satisfaction ‘I suppose you’re in a position of authority’

‘I don’t talk about things I don’t know’

‘I’m sure you don’t’ Mr Beadle inched himself deeper into his chair ‘Of course,’ he said ‘you know that Guy Afton has a great public reputation Millions of people are watching him at this very moment’

‘I know that’

‘And they’re all being bamboozled by this . . .’ Mr Beadle chuckled fatly ‘this confidence trickster?’

‘Most of them are’

‘Enlighten us, then,’ Mr Beadle invited ‘Give us the benefit of your sources of information’

Draper slid down from the table and crossed over to the television set He jabbed at the screen with his finger ‘I know this man’ he said ‘I know him personally I was with him this morning when this so-called small businessman arrived’ He

watched Mr Beadle's face as he spoke, watching it disintegrate until his pipe remained clenched beneath his teeth like a small steel rod still holding firm in a block of concrete that, inexplicably, had turned to jelly

'So you see,' he concluded, 'I do know what I'm talking about. I know a damn sight better than you.'

He walked out, leaving Mr Beadle slumped in his chair, a wisp of smoke spiralling over his head. Mr Evans hurried after him. 'Great stuff,' he said, 'you settled him that time. He won't be so keen now to lay down the law.'

'I suppose not.'

'What's wrong with you? You don't sound very pleased about it.'

Wearily, Draper rubbed his hand over his eyes. 'It's hardly seemed worth doing.'

'Of course it was worth doing. Pity you won't be here to see the difference.'

'So long as it makes you happy.'

Mr Evans slapped him on the back. 'Happy's not the word. It was something that had to be done.' He glanced about him, but the hall was empty. 'It's like I said,' he hurried. 'People like us have got to stick together in this world.'

He visited six different pubs and although he drank a lot, he remained sober. The direction he was taking led him eventually to Cynthia's flat, and at intervals he stopped to telephone. There was never any reply, but at each stop the face that confronted him in the small square of mirror was whiter and more desperate than the time before. Once a car narrowly missed him, swerving to one side as he blindly stepped off the kerb. Later, he saw two policemen, their capes glistening in the light drizzle and he realized he was wearing no raincoat and that his shoulders, and the knees of his trousers were wet. In a shop doorway he combed his hair, and when he climbed the stairs to the flat he paused frequently so that he should not be out of breath when he reached the top. He rang the bell, and when there was no answer, hammered on the door. The noise made by his fists echoed down the well of the stairs, and when the

time switch clicked off he slid down on the mat, his back against the door, staring blindly into the darkness. Cynthia was not at home. He said the words aloud, repeating them several times. But he continued to sit there until the chill of his wet clothes became uncomfortable. Then he got up, his knees cracking like pistol shots, and went down the stairs, and out into the rain.

5

The tide marks had completed full circle. They spread from wall to wall, ridging the ceiling with long leprous lines, each one annotated with a date and a set of initials. They went a long way back, thought Draper (over five years, and in all that time Fenning had not done a thing about the damp). He climbed on a chair to complete the record, flinching as the pencil jabbed through the plaster. No one, not even Fenning, could accuse him of adding to the damage. Against the final ridge he drew a dancing skeleton, and beneath it he printed 'The Living End'.

His head ached, and as he stepped down from the chair he sneezed violently. The paper felt like stuff. But the chances were that he had a cold coming. He had spent all of Sunday in bed, padding slowly every hour in a raincoat covering his pyjamas - to telephone Cynthia but there had been no answer. He could not understand it. He had not said anything about going away, and she had known that it was his weekend off. He filled a cup with cold water and carried it into the next room.

'Got any aspirin?'

'Might have.'

'I let's have a couple then.'

'Why? What's the matter with you?'

'I've got a chill,' said Draper. 'I got wet on Saturday night.'

Doreen tipped two tablets into his hand. 'Don't breathe over me,' she said. 'I don't want to catch it.'

'Any germ'd run a mile if it saw you.'

She sniffed loudly. 'Charming as ever.'

'It's the company,' said Draper. 'It brings out the best in one.'

He stuck the aspirins to the back of his tongue and gulped down the water. The taste, both of the water and the medicine, was foul. 'Did Harry Troy tell you he was getting married?'

'When?'

'In a couple of months.'

'I'll believe it when it happens.'

'Doreen,' he said earnestly, setting the cup on her desk. 'Have you never heard of an act of faith?'

'What do you mean?'

'Simply believe,' said Draper. 'Not *when* it happens, but when someone says it's going to happen. I give you my word that H. Troy Esquire sincerely intends to get spliced.'

'Who to?'

'A charming girl named Sally.'

'She'll need to be charming.' Doreen dug into her bag and brought out a bar of chocolate. She unwrapped it completely and began to eat it, two squares at a time.

'Don't you ever worry about getting fat?'

She shook her head, her jaws moving rhythmically. 'It gives me energy. It said so on the telly.'

She licked a sliver of raisin from her upper lip

'But Doreen,' he said, 'you can't believe everything you see on the telly.'

'I don't care,' she said. 'I like the taste.'

There was a Monday morning crowd in the café, and Draper squeezed his way to the counter through a knot of Cypriots, one of whom was re-enacting the previous night's fight. When he lunged forward the mustard pot skidded across the table and landed in the lap of a blonde woman wearing a shiny leather coat.

She knocked it to the ground and dabbed at the smear of mustard with her handkerchief. 'Watch what you're bleedin' well doing.'

'Why you swear at me?' He was a handsome man, thought Draper, but the ring on his index finger looked more like a weapon than an ornament.

''Cause you're bleedin' careless.'

'Was an accident.'

'Fooling about like a big kid. Gone all over my coat.'

He took out his own handkerchief, and grinning broadly, mopped at the leather. 'I clean it up good.'

'You'd better. It cost me forty quid.'

A smaller man sitting behind her tugged at her sleeve 'How you earn it? On your back?'

The blonde stood up and swayed over to the counter 'Bleedin' cheek she said. No idea of manners these bleedin' foreigners. She opened her bag and a gust of perfume billowed out 'How much dear?'

'Two teas was it?'

'No, coffees'

'A hob, then?'

She handed over a hillip and expence 'For the waitress, dear.'

The lag snapped hut and he swayed over the right skidding off her shiny hip. Maxwell came over and said 'Who else'd think of leaving a tip on a couple of cups of coffee?'

'Not me' said Draper.

'No you wouldn't would you?'

'Will you make more than a lad?'

'That's not the point' said Maxwell for once. It's up to the customer to hold you on the ground. Mr Leal looked in an enamelled jug over a full of coffee. It was to the depth of an inch of milk in the bottom. He said to Draper 'What's that?'

'Yes please'

Mr Leal turned the tap of the urn and held the cup a good six inches below. Steam coiled over the rim and he turned the tap off.

'The cups not full' said Draper.

'What d'you mean it's not full?'

'Just look at it. As the men subsided they could both see the level of the liquid was at least an inch from the top.'

'Bad judgement' said Draper. He filled the urn until it was level with the brim and when Draper took it tea sloped into the saucer.

He inspected it closely. The colour was still elusive but today it was more brown than blue. What brand is it he asked.

'One of the best' said Mr Leal. 'We only use the best stuff here.'

'Do you happen to know a lady named Mrs Barrow?'

'I don't believe so' Why?'

'You'd get on well with her,' said Draper. 'You have a lot in common.'

The list was up to the old Monday morning standard too - ten drunks, three drunk and disorderly, two insulting words, one straight assault, two suspected persons, five soliciting, one larceny, two receiving, and a breaking and entering 'It's a lot of old rubbish,' said the jailer 'Might take some time though'

A reasonable assumption, thought Draper While Budleigh dispensed justice he concentrated on carving his initials on the top of the press box The first letter was already completed, a tall 'J' embossed with knobs and scrolls and all carefully inked in To clean it off they would have to plane down at least a quarter of an inch The 'D' was still unfinished, but he was making progress

'Seen the crossword today?' hissed the jailer

'Not yet What's the problem?'

'Word of five letters denoting the collection of money'

Draper scribbled in his notebook 'What about ponce?'

'Shouldn't think so'

'Pence then'

'That's it'

The boy wonder strikes again thought Draper He was wearing his charcoal suit with the black tie but the new identity that had seemed to leak from every seam, was slowly evaporating The money was down too All that was left of the bribe (he forced himself to use the word) was seven pounds, but he still had three pounds remaining from his wages Ten pounds should see him through until he had found somewhere to live The chief problem was where to look

If he could count on a regular arrangement with Sergeant Fuller and his colleagues he could think about moving up in the social scale Nothing fancy but something better than unheated rooms, and stew three times a week Of course, it was all wrong he told himself Taking a bribe was all wrong, and letting a berk like Bernard Swan get away with it was several degrees worse But it was hard to see where the harm had been

done. No one had suffered, except Fenning who had lost a few quid over the report he had not written. There was no sense in working himself into a lather over it. He remembered a sergeant he had known in the army, a tall leathery man whose sharply creased uniform and dazzling cap badge had disguised, not mere inertia, but a raging allergy to work. When Draper had joined his squad he had taken him to one side for briefing. 'Look,' he had said, 'you get paid the same whether you work your balls off or not, so it's just common sense to take it as easy as you can. There's just one thing to remember. Keep moving, it makes you look busy and keep out of people's way. Nobody wants to pay attention, nobody cares what you're doing, but if you make it so bloody obvious that you're skiving then they'll have you on a tizz.' The only real time the army bothers about is getting found out. And the advice still held out. thought Draper that he found out was what brought people to court. Not getting found out was the way to prosper.

The man in the dock could not wither. They had been found out. And not for the first time. Ten previous convictions, reported the jailer. All for just that, boy lifting, stealing goods from railway platform, theft of tools, bottles from hop doorways. On the last occasion he was sentenced to nine months imprisonment.

'Are the details of that last conviction and sentence correct?' asked the clerk.

The man in the dock nodded glumly. From a distance he seemed to be quite inert, but as you drew nearer he seemed to be quite alive. He wore a white shirt and striped trousers, but looking more closely, Draper could see that the man's face was an illusion. In some subtle way every plane of the man's face, every fold of his suit was blurred, as if a cloth had once had been lightly smudged by someone's finger. The shirt, although it had been washed, was crumpled. The profile was crooked. The eye was the adbare on the knot. The suit was beggy at the knee.

Budleigh scribbled briefly in the register. 'Committed to London Sessions as an Incurable Rogue.'

How extraordinary to be called that officially, thought Draper. It was like a title or a profession. 'Meet Roger Forsythe

Esquire, Gentleman's Gentleman and Incorrigible Rogue' Or 'Give a big hand to your friend and my friend, Alastair Pigskin, the Incorrigible Singing Rogue He drew Pigskin in a kilt and Forsythe wearing a monocle With a little imagination they could turn themselves into a double act

Troy edged himself into the press box Fenning wants you back at the office

But it's only just started'

'I'm relieving you'

'All right then But what's it all about?'

Troy put his hand on Draper's shoulder 'He got someone with him in the office, he said I think it's old Banks

I realize of course that there is nothing that can be done now said Mr Banks but for several weeks I have been most uneasy in my conscience about the abrupt end to our negotiations

Fancy that said Brewer

Fenning motioned him to be quiet And what exactly did happen Mr Banks?

Draper pressed his palms against the filing cabinet and felt beads of perspiration gather on the cold metal When he took his hands away there was a loud sucking noise but no one turned round

Mr Banks moistened his lip I have done nothing illegal he said No contract was signed You appreciate that of course But there was an understanding

There certainly was said Brewer I was supposed to be coming round the next day with a photographer but when we got there you'd scattered

Mr Banks licked his lips again Perfectly correct My wife, and Trixie and I were taken away late the previous night by a young man named Cope He persuaded us that you were grossly underpaying us for the story and offered us substantially better terms We spent several nights in an hotel and then went away for an extended holiday It was while we were in Skegness that I began to feel I had treated you unfairly, and I decided that the only thing to do was to apologize'

'Let's have it then' said Brewer.

'What do you mean?'

'The apology'

Mr Banks stood up and cleared his throat 'I am extremely sorry,' he said

There was a clatter of high heels on the grating but Draper was too far away to look up Also, he thought, the moment was hardly opportune

'What interests me' said Fenning, 'is why you listened to Cope in the first place I mean you're an honest man Didn't the whole thing strike you as a bit odd'

Mr Banks nodded eagerly 'Indeed I did But Mr Cope is a very persuasive young man and when he said that he had been advised to call on me by one of his colleagues in the office, I assumed that everything was in order At first, that is Later I knew differently

'Did he say which colleague?' asked Fenning His voice was mild, but as he leaned forward Draper noted a vein throbbing steadily in the contour of his forehead

Mr Banks looked puzzled 'I don't

'The one that Cope said he had in the office

'Oh yes,' said Mr Banks 'He said that Mr Draper had told him the whole story and that he found it absolutely fascinating' He looked from face to face, smiling brightly happy to have been of service

Draper found himself snuggling back He seemed to have lost control of his facial muscles and a quantic grin was the only expression that he could muster He bit his lip until the blood came but the arrangement in position like a mask cut out from a packet of cereals that had been welded into place.

No one spoke, and when the phone rang Lauren snatched it off the hook as though the shrill rangle was intruding on a moment of mourning 'Fenning's features,' she said 'The Gazette, yes?' She listened carefully, and wrote a name on a scrap of paper.

Fenning looked round 'What is it?'

'It's the Gazette,' said Doreen 'They want to know why

we've not sent them the report of a case on Friday.' She glanced down at the piece of paper. 'Bernard Swan. Charged with receiving.'

Fenning raised his eyebrows. 'I don't know. Who did the court on Friday?'

Me with my little bow, thought Draper. 'I did,' he said, 'I did it all day.'

He sat on the grey leather couch with his arms folded, and his knees together, and his toe-caps reflecting the light that filtered through the slats of the venetian blinds. 'Will Mr Afton be long, d'you think?'

'I don't expect so. What time was your appointment?'

'There wasn't an exact time,' said Draper. 'He just said Monday afternoon.'

'Very well, then. I'll inquire.' The secretary went with the office, he thought; clean, trim, and functional. Her hair was ash blonde, almost the exact colour of the couch, and her nail polish was silver. 'What was your name again?'

'Draper. John Draper.'

'Thank you.' The floor was carpeted, and her heels made no sound as she crossed over to the far door. He watched her progress, admiring the view out of habit, but he felt no quickening of interest. It was only to be expected, he thought; a man without a job thinks first of how he is going to earn a living. Sex comes further down the list.

She reappeared in less than a minute. 'Mr Afton says would you mind waiting for a short while. He just has some business to attend to.'

'I don't mind,' said Draper. Time was not important. He had no wish to hurry anything, for every second contained the seed of some potential disaster, and the germination of the present batch was still going on. Fenning had unearthed the basic facts about Bernard Swan from the court records, and a potted report of the case was on its way to the *Gazette*. What Bernard Swan would say, and what Sergeant Fuller would do, he could not begin to imagine. His first thought had been to remove himself from the scene of the crime, and when Fenning had

told him that he was fired, his only emotion had been one of profound relief

'You can take your cards with you,' Fenning had said.

'All right'

'You needn't expect a reference.'

'I suppose not'

'You're lucky I'm not suing you for damages'

'Thank you'

'Now clear out'

He had done as he was told climbing the stairs in the dark, sniffing for the last time the essence of Mr Fed's kitchen, watching the buses roll by the street door like a caravan to freedom. Fenning, he knew, had acted on an impulse which he would possibly come to regret. His humiliation had been too brief to give any lasting satisfaction. Fenning would want him back, if only to dig the knife a little deeper. But it was too late for that, he was out and he intended to stay out.

'Would you care for a magazine while you're waiting?'

'Thanks very much'

He leafed through the glossy page, noting, without interest, the portraits of debts, their teeth fixed at the photographer, their hands held limply by glass-eyed escorts. Even they must have problems, he thought, but he had no idea what they could be. In any event they would be solved by some rich, omniscient relative, wadded away by the flutter of banknotes. Impatiently, he put the magazine down. It was not wanting money that had landed him in trouble. It was getting too little of it, and - at the same time - getting round out.

A small red light flashed on the secretary's desk and she nodded towards him. 'Mr Afton is ready to see you now.'

'Thank you,' he said. Thank you for nothing, he thought. It was a day of unrelieved blackness, and all that Guy Afton could do was deepen the dye.

As he came through the door Cynthia held her breath. His face was pale and both his hands were clenched into fists. 'Hello, John,' she said, smiling, but careful to keep her voice neutral.

He started violently. 'Where've you been? I've been phoning you all weekend

'Why not sit over there,' interrupted Guy, 'where we can see each other.' He waved towards a wing-backed chair directly in front of his desk, and obediently Draper sat down. He glanced to one side, but all he could see of Cynthia was the toe of one shoe.

'You didn't mention any special time,' he said. 'You just said the afternoon.'

'That's right. I'm glad you looked in.'

Draper smiled uneasily. 'I didn't think it was as casual as that. I thought you were going to tear me off a strip.'

'Indeed?'

'That's how it sounded.'

'Would it be surprising?'

'I suppose not.'

'But you came,' said Guy. 'And I'll tell you why.' He pointed the stem of his pipe at Draper's chest like a barrel of a gun. 'You came because you felt guilty,' he said. 'Because you knew you'd done something wrong.'

Draper swivelled in his chair, but Cynthia was looking fixedly out of the window. 'Do you realize,' said Guy, 'that if I wanted to divorce my wife I could cite you as corespondent, and it might cost you a great deal of money.'

'I haven't any money.'

'Then you'd go to jail.'

'What good would that do?'

Guy put his pipe in the ash-tray. 'It might give me a small amount of pleasure,' he said. 'Not much perhaps, but what's the alternative if you have no money?'

'I don't know,' said Draper. After Mr Banks, Bernard Swan, and getting fired came this he thought. It was the end of a perfect day. He levered himself forward and looked at Cynthia. She wore the green linen dress, and she was twisting one of the buttons round and round so that it winked like a heliograph. Her head was turned in profile, and his eyes followed the line of her neck, the long, graceful curve that led down to sloping breasts, and the hummock of her belly. How would it be, he

wondered, if he told Afton that he could draw his wife's body from memory. Now. This minute . . . In detail. But what would be the point? It would upset not only Afton, but Cynthia too, and she looked pretty shaken already. There must have been a row: a big one probably. But how had it ended, and where had she been for the past two days? Her hands fell into her lap, and he tried to see whether or not she was wearing her wedding ring. The finger was bare, but it proved nothing. If she had gone back to Afton, the time to advertise it would be later. After the inquest.

Guy stood up, and as he paused by the window his face was blotted out in a flood of light. 'You put me in a spot on Saturday,' he said. 'It could have been a very unpleasant situation. Most unpleasant. There I was with a man from your own home town - a very influential man, in the circumstances - and there were you, in my wife's flat.' He jammed his hands in the pockets of his jacket, and jutted out his jaw. 'Well,' he demanded, 'what would you have thought about it?'

Draper shifted uncomfortably, his trousers tight in his crotch. 'You seemed to pass it off all right.'

'*I seemed to pass it off all right!*' repeated Guy, and Draper had a fleeting image of each word in the sentence travelling - like a door-knob - beneath a battery of nozzles which coated it, top and bottom, with guaranteed, rust-proof irony.

'I don't think he noticed anything,' he said.

'You don't *think!*' The light was blinding, and the voice seemed to come from within a large shifting halo that moved from side to side like a head of thistledown, brilliant in the sun, and grotesquely enlarged. He moved round the desk, and in the shadow, his face became visible once more. It was closed but amiable; the mouth firm, the eyes alert. It was a face, thought Draper suddenly, of a man about to propose a bargain.

'To forestall any unpleasantness I introduced you as a member of my staff,' said Guy taking off his glasses and caressing them with a large, white handkerchief. 'I propose now that we should make the appointment official.'

Draper said nothing. He heard Cynthia gasp for breath (as she had once done when he put his cold hands on her bare

back), but the words were meaningless. He turned to her for help, but her attention was fixed on Guy.

'What shall I do?' he said. 'Was it your idea?'

She looked at him directly for the first time since he had come into the room, and for a moment she was smiling. Her lips were drawn back, and her eyes were huge. 'Not my idea,' she said.

'But what shall I do?'

She shook her head. 'I can't tell you. It's for you to decide.' She glanced at Guy. 'That's what you meant, isn't it? He's got to decide for himself.'

Guy breathed gently on his glasses, and gently inclined his head. 'I'd have thought it was a very simple decision to make. Nothing that requires a great deal of discussion.'

He settled the glasses back on his nose, and focused on Draper. 'I happen to need researchers for a new television series I'm planning, and I think you could handle the work. You'd start at twenty pounds a week, with expenses.' He held out a box of cigarettes, and when Draper had taken one, he held a lighted match to the tip. The flame was perfectly steady, but the match had almost burned out before Draper took the first puff.

'Of course,' said Guy, 'the job would entail a lot of travelling. All over the country and out of it sometimes. You'd not be in London a great deal.' He replaced the match-box on his desk and aligned it with the blotter. 'You would be working for me,' he said. 'You would have nothing to do with my wife.'

Draper watched a flake of ash drift from his cigarette on to the raised seam of his trousers, and remotely he admired the contrast between the thin white cinder and the charcoal grey of the material. He was conscious of Cynthia, sitting so close that he could reach out and touch her if only he dared, and he waited for her to say something. But no one spoke, and he brushed away the flake of ash and said, 'I understand.'

'I want to be sure that you do,' said Guy, 'I want you to think it over.'

Now you mean?'

'Now.'

Cynthia crossed her legs, and he saw the flash of white as she straightened her skirt. She looked at him without expression, and nodded briefly. 'Go on,' she said.

It was another test, thought Draper, but this time it was different. It was no longer a game, and there was more at stake than what someone thought of him. He was on his own. There was no one to help him, no one to whom the right decision mattered half so much. The important thing was not to panic. He had to review the situation calmly, with the facts in their proper order.

He thought first of the agency and how he could never go back there. He thought of the cold room overlooking the trees, and remembered that even that would no longer be his by the end of the week. He thought with envy of Troy and Sally, and he thought irrelevantly of the shaving mirror screwed to the wall of the bathroom. He thought of the jobs he had applied for, and the reasons given for turning him down. He thought, briefly, of money. And until the cigarette burned his fingers, he thought of Cynthia.

Then deliberately he thought no more. 'I'll take the job,' he said, and as he spoke he saw them look at him with surprise. It was his voice, he decided, not merely what he said. And even to himself it sounded stronger, more assertive.

Cynthia had not moved, but the distance between them seemed to have grown. They could no longer touch. They would never touch again. But for the job he took her, and now he recognized the sound as familiar as a bar of music.

It was like the day his voice broke, and his mother thought it was a stranger on the telephone. She got used to it though, and the same thing would happen again. He shook Alton's hand, and smiled brilliantly. There was nothing to worry about. He was on his own, but he was all right. People would no longer wonder who or what he was. People always recognized the voice of a man who knew what he wanted.

*Some recent Penguin fiction is described
on the following pages*



Debbie Go Home

Alan Paton

These impressive stories are set in the South Africa of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*.

'Condemnation of race prejudice is everywhere passionate, even if unspoken. The exactness and restraint of the writing confer strength and authority on Mr Paton's attitude. These stories confirm Mr Paton's reputation as a writer who never hesitates to use his voice in any effort to convince us of his creative power and his sincerity' – *The Times Literary Supplement*

The Empty Canvas

Alberto Moravia

A subtle exploration of love and possession by Italy's top-selling novelist, Alberto Moravia, author of *The Woman of Rome*

Dino is a painter who at thirty five feels he has betrayed his talent and strength as a man. At this point in his life he meets Cecilia, a sixteen year old artist's model. Dino falls compulsively in love with the girl. He is soon filled with a corrosive jealousy which feeds in him an overwhelming desire to prove that Cecilia is unfaithful. In a fantastic climax Dino attempts to break the girl's resistance, and proves his own innate weakness.

The Empty Canvas is a compelling study of love and its substitutions.

A World of Difference

Stanley Price

A ribald rake's progress – with no holds barred. Nicholas Hewitt, a very recent product of Cambridge, decides to make the final sacrifice – he takes what the New World has to offer. His chaotic mixings with call-girls and impresarios, writers and millionaires, the low life of Broadway and the high life of Long Island are told with a razor-sharp hatchet in one hand and a needle-pointed stiletto in the other.